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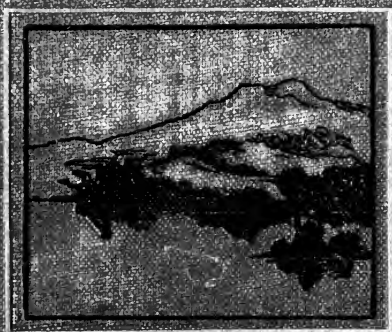
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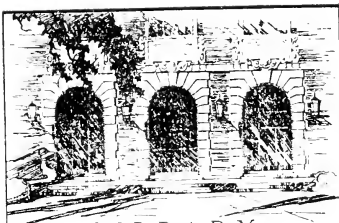
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BETWEEN THE ACTS.

A Novel.

BY

C. H. D. STOCKER.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. I.



LONDON :

RICHARD BENTLEY AND SON,

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BETWEEN THE ACTS.

CHAPTER I.

‘Farewell !

Listen to the passing bell !

It says, thou and I must part,

With a light and a heavy heart.’

SHELLEY.

‘**S**HE appointed half-past five, and I am here ; but I need hardly expect her for an hour yet, to put it mildly.’

The speaker put his watch back into his pocket, dropped on to a rough garden-seat

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near at hand, and began to look about him. The place of appointment was a neglected garden on the side of a hill looking down upon Mentone, one of those artificial terraces whereby the industrious Piedmontese win a few narrow acres from the sloping limestone hills, and grow their flowery corn.

Looking downwards over the broken wall beside him, he saw the green corn growing, full of scarlet and purple anemones, with great patches of wild hyacinths beside it, and yellow and white narcissus. On the bare rock all about hung geranium and cactus plants ; wild myrtle, heliotrope, and masses of roses grew luxuriantly over the fragments of wall and about an old Saracen tower that stood amongst the ruins of what had been a little convent, and latterly had probably been used as a villa, but was now deserted and desolate in the

midst of this flowery wilderness. It had been a fine warm day, after an unusually open winter ; but though the earth still kept the warmth of the noonday sun, a little cold evening wind, scented with hyacinth and orange-blossom, was blowing off the sea.

‘What an hour to choose to keep one waiting about !’ he muttered, shivering, and began to pace up and down along the overgrown walks amongst the ilex and orange trees. The momentary irritation soon faded from his face, and left a melancholy, troubled expression that seemed to rest habitually there, since it had worn a furrow between the brows, and drawn stern lines beside the mouth ; it was no fleeting emotion of the hour, but some long, living trouble of the heart that made the young face look old before the time, and scattered

stealthy threads of grey amongst the brown hair.

It was a dark, sunburnt face, with fine straight features ; a handsome face, but that something—sorrow, perhaps, or illness—which had made the cheeks hollow, drawn the brows together, and given a sad expression to the firmly closed lips under the dark moustache, effaced the impression of its beauty, lending it, however, a deeper though a painful interest. The blue-grey eyes that wander so absently over the sunset landscape are unspeakably sad—sad and tired. This soul has been beating its wings against some prison-walls in vain, you would say. But hope dies hard in youth ; the struggle is fitful now, but it is not over ; courage is giving way, though it may yet rally to a strong will.

For two long hours he paced and stood

about, now looking at his watch, now staring at the western sky with eyes that saw none of its glory, while the sound of mule-bells came up from hidden paths below, and the sun took his last look of all the fair valley, throwing long yellow lights and longer shadows across it, lighting the opposite mountains with a tender rosy tint, and revealing clefts, and peaks, and scarped crags that had been lost in the blaze of noon.

‘A hoax, I suppose,’ he said at last, in the tone of a man who is used to such things, and as if he had perhaps scarcely expected anything else. He hesitated a minute, more than half inclined to go, but he sat down again. ‘It is the last chance,’ he said—‘the last. I’ll wait a little longer.’

He covered his face with his hand, and

sat motionless ; the chill wind stirred the leaves and made a little bodeful sighing amongst the ruined walls, and through the silence he heard, far, far away, the slow tolling of some church bell.

‘Patience on a monument!’ said a voice close beside him.

He had been so lost in thought that he had not heard approaching steps.

‘Victorine!’ he exclaimed, rising to his feet, and his hands moved towards hers—involuntarily as it seemed, for they did not meet. ‘Will you sit here, or walk about?’ he asked in coldly courteous tones, his eyes not seeking hers.

‘Oh! this will do, I suppose,’ she answered, flinging herself upon the bench at the edge of the terrace, and opening a large fan. ‘I wonder you waited—you might have known I wasn’t coming so early.’

‘It was your own appointment,’ he observed quietly.

‘What time did I say?’ she demanded.

‘Half-past five.’

‘Well, it’s not seven yet,’ she said pettishly; ‘and besides, I meant half-past six—you might have known that. You needn’t have come; besides, I kept you waiting on purpose.’

He made no remark, but sat down on the broken wall hard by; at the same moment he saw the sun dip behind the dark promontory, and all the valley was shrouded in shadow. It went dimly across his fancy that here was the true picture of the life that lay before him—the sun gone down, the shadows deepening towards the long cold night; only, for him, what hope that it would ever rise again? He raised his eyes mechanically as he put the thought

aside, and there against the evening sky rose the far-off peaks of eternal snow, still wearing a crown of light.

‘Well, what do you want?’ her voice broke in upon his reverie. ‘I can’t stay here all night catching my death of cold to suit your whims ; so if you have anything to say, say it ; though you needn’t suppose I shall listen, for I shan’t!’ and she leaned back and fanned herself, and hummed a little air.

She was a large, handsome woman, something older than the man to whom she spoke, although by the waning light it would have been difficult to guess the exact difference. Her golden-brown hair was arranged in massive plaits on the top of her head, and fell in great curls on her shoulders, and was perhaps the most striking thing about her appearance, al-

though she was dressed in the extreme of fashion ; her ungloved hands and arms, bare to the elbow, covered with rings and bracelets ; long ear-rings hanging from her ears, and flashing now and again as she tossed her head and the stones caught a gleam of light ; and about her throat a quantity of lace and massive gold ornaments.

He looked at her face wistfully ; nay, there was more than wistfulness in those miserable eyes.

‘ Victorine,’ he said at last huskily, ‘ is this to be the end ?—the *last* time ?’

‘ What else do you suppose ?’ she asked scornfully. ‘ It’s no use going on, and there’s no great pleasure or excitement in these melodramatic scenes, is there ? I, at least, am sick of it all. We really needn’t try to be sentimental any longer.’

It was easy to see that ready words had risen to his lips, some bitter, stinging retort perhaps, for there went a flash across his face like the sudden leaping of a flame ; but the lips closed again patiently, and he said nothing.

‘ You think you are keeping your temper now, I suppose !’ she exclaimed, looking scornfully at his set pale face ; ‘ don’t do it on my account. It used to amuse me to hear you throwing away your logic and your sarcasm—why don’t you do it now ?’

‘ Victorine,’ said he, in tones of barely subdued vexation, ‘ if you and I are to part now, and for ever, for God’s sake let us part in peace, or go our ways at once without another word.’

‘ You want to get rid of me,’ she cried ; ‘ I know you do !’

‘I should not be here, I think, if that were all I wanted,’ he answered sadly.

‘Well, I’m not going to England with you, and I shan’t wait here for you, or anywhere else. I don’t believe you are obliged to go at all. That old man can surely die without you.’

‘We need not discuss that,’ he said shortly.

‘On that point I am determined.’

‘Very well ; then you will never see me again.’

‘Then I can’t help it,’ he answered gloomily. ‘We have tried the experiment long enough. I am beaten ; I give it up now. God forgive me if I do wrong !’

‘You’re glad to be rid of me, I know!’ she cried. ‘If you say you’re not, I shan’t believe you. Why did you ever marry me? Why did you pretend to love me? Oh! you couldn’t bear me out of your sight ; I

was perfect, beautiful, good—heaven knows what besides—now you can hardly wait to say good-bye. Why did you marry me?’

Half-a-dozen different answers rose in his mind.

‘Because I loved you; because I was mad, infatuated; because I was but a boy, and believed in beautiful womanhood; because I thought honour demanded it; because you made me do it—I don’t know why;’ but he only looked away gloomily across the shadowy fields and was silent. Why answer her?

‘You never loved me!’ she went on, her voice rising and her gestures becoming somewhat theatrical; ‘you were ashamed of me from the first. I know you were. Otherwise, why have you kept your marriage such a dire secret from your people in England all these seven years?’

‘You know very well that I did it at your entreaty,’ he replied wearily, as though he had gone over this ground many times already. ‘I wanted to tell them at once, and take all the consequences. I should have thought my being ready to forego the property might have conveyed to you some idea of the—of the love I had for you,’ he said bitterly. ‘Money is a standard that you can appreciate things by.’

‘I wasn’t going over there to be pointed and sneered at by all your fine friends,’ she exclaimed irrelevantly; ‘and to go to church and play propriety, and act the virtuous wife before your uncle—that was what you expected!’

‘I didn’t know then that any virtue you could show would have to be put on. I was a fool, but I believed in you then, Victorine.’

She laughed contemptuously.

‘I believe still that there is a better soul in you if you would not stifle it—if you would once for all abandon these vicious, worthless pleasures that get such hold on you, and come away out of reach of temptation. Why ruin your life and mine, Victorine?’

Her eyes were staring fixedly into the darkening distance, and the lines about her mouth moved and trembled, although her lips were set fast together.

‘Mine *is* ruined,’ he went on, speaking low, and trying to keep down something of impetuous urgency that would creep into his tone. ‘Whatever happens, I can never look my friends in the face again as an upright, honourable man ; I have deceived them these seven miserable years. Whether I tell it now or not, and whether my wife

comes home with me or leaves me to fight my battles and bear my burdens alone, I have lost what can never be mine again. But I don't blame you, Victorine—I ought to have known better than to yield—I did know. Come away with me—away from temptation !' He bent a little nearer, his voice was tremulous with strong feeling, his hand made some little movement towards hers.

The set, staring eyes filled with tears ; for one brief moment she was softened, but only for a moment.

' I don't want to stand in your way,' she said in a hard voice, ' but I will not be interfered with. I will live how and where I please, and do exactly what I like exactly when I like, and nothing else ; and no one on earth shall stop me—you least of all !'

' As long as I am your husband I am

responsible for you,' he replied with all the emotion gone out of his voice, and his eyes upon the ground ; but his hand was trembling as it nervously pulled the grasses from the wall.

'Ah ! well, you've satisfied your conscience now, I should think, with all the sermons you have preached me, and the way you have stuck to me and persecuted me all these years, following me about as you have done. You have not done the slightest good with it all. If that's all you care about, you can leave me—I wish you would—you never cared for me !' and she began to cry passionately.

'Oh, Victorine !' he murmured with weary impatience. 'You might spare yourself and me such nonsense as this.'

'I hate you !' she cried presently, drying her eyes. 'I only married you to ruin you.'

It's done now, and you may go where you like—you can't get rid of me nor undo it. And you'll have to support me, too. I shall want—oh ! I shall let you know often enough what I want, and you'll have to pay—you'll have to pay, and you won't dare to tell. Aha ! it would be quite worth while to convert me, wouldn't it ?' She laughed out loud. ' And some day I shall come and claim my place in your grand home—some day when you have forgotten me, and all the world is ignorant of your wretched secret, your wife will walk in. Why ! I thought you wanted me to come ? you don't seem to like the prospect now.'

He had turned so pale that she could see it even in the wan evening light.

' Victorine,' he said, determined to keep quiet, ' as long as you are my wife my home is yours ; when you come you will find the

door open. I shall not compel you to come.'

'Ha, ha! I know you won't,' she retorted; 'and as for saying "as long as I am your wife," that is a threat to divorce me, I know: but you can't do it, and you daren't do it.'

'It rests with you to take care that I never can,' he said. 'As for daring—you may push things too far.'

Her eyes flashed with fury. She seized a stone that lay loose on the top of the low, broken wall beside her, and raised her hand to throw it at him.

He knew she was quite capable of doing it, and sat still looking at her without flinching. At the moment he really did not care whether she threw it or not. Life was misery, and nothing, he thought, could make it worse; certainly not a blow on the

head from a stone ; that might prove a swift and certain cure.

Seeing that he was absolutely indifferent she let her hand sink beside her, still holding the stone, her handsome face distorted with rage and hate.

‘I tried to poison you once,’ she said between her teeth.

‘I know you did—more than once, I should have said,’ he remarked quietly ; ‘and if I hadn’t long ceased to look for reasons for anything you do, I should have wondered what possible object you could have had in poisoning me, because it is rather a dangerous game, and even you couldn’t get money out of a dead man.’

‘No ; but you would have been out of my way,’ she said indifferently.

‘Why did you stop short, then ?’ he asked.

She paused, playing with the jagged

stone in her hand; it was so large that her fingers scarcely met over it.

‘I don’t know,’ she answered presently; ‘it was always open to me to go on at any time. I can throw this stone at you now if I like—would it kill you?’

He knew her too well to feel any sort of shock at the cold-blooded curiosity of her question, but a slight shadow of irrepressible disgust passed across his face.

‘I really don’t know,’ he answered with frank indifference—‘nor do I much care, for myself. Give it to me;’ then as she only held it tighter, ‘I would rather be dead than alive, but I should be sorry if you threw it, Victorine—sorry for you.’

‘Sorry for me!’ she cried, blazing up, half raising her hand again. ‘Oh! I know. You pity me, I suppose, for my violent temper, my bad education, my life on the

stage, my—my—my low, foreign birth—my—what did you call it?—my utter godlessness—is that what you pity me for? Say—speak!’ she cried, raising the stone higher as he only looked vexed and bored and made no reply. ‘You think you will always be master of the field by keeping your temper and holding your tongue, even when you are pale with passion! That is your English pride! You think you—you think——’ she stammered with angry excitement—‘you think you can rejoice in your superiority over a raving woman—a mere mad foreigner. You have always looked down upon me. You think I dare not throw this stone at you. I wish I had anything better! You try to frighten me with your pity—pity me then!’ and she suddenly flung the stone with all her force.

Instinctively he bent his head, and it flew past him and went tumbling down the slope.

They looked at each other, and he rose to his feet. Victorine burst out laughing.

‘We only want footlights and an audience,’ cried she, ‘to make it quite complete. Very effective!’

‘Good-bye, Victorine,’ said he. ‘We may drop the curtain now, I think.’

She held out her hand, the same right hand that even now had thrown the stone at him.

‘We may as well shake hands, I suppose,’ she said indifferently; ‘it looks better.’

‘Never mind the look, since we have no audience,’ said he bitterly, ignoring her hand and turning away. ‘Good-bye.’

‘Oh, good-bye, Lucifer! Pray don’t!

said she, with a mocking laugh. 'I shall take good care of your address, you know. Remember, this may not be the last act,' she cried after him, as he went; 'the curtain may rise again any day.'





CHAPTER II.

‘ But my good father thought a king a king,
He cared not for the affection of the house ;
He held his sceptre like a pedant’s wand
To lash offence, and with long arms and hands
Reached out, and pick’d offenders from the mass
For judgment.’

The Princess.

‘ **I** SAY,’ said Jack Worsley, pushing open the back-door of the paternal mansion—no, by-the-bye, it was not a mansion, for it had but one staircase ; nor, now I come to think of it, am I sure that it could strictly be called paternal, for the Worsley family possessed not a foot of ground of their own on the

face of the earth ; and if a place, to be called paternal, must be the residence of one's father, even then it will hardly come within the limit, for Mr. Worsley was seldom there. What falsehoods one does tell ! We will content ourselves with simply calling it the back-door, then.

‘I say, there's a storm brewing !’ he remarked, kicking his heavy boots against the doorstep to loosen the mud that clung to them, and surveying his two sisters with a knowing and somewhat mischievous air of caution.

Jack was the youngest of the four elder Worsleys, and very small and slight for his fifteen years ; he looked, in fact, more like a child of eleven ; his hair, undoubtedly the most striking thing about him, was of a brilliant red—we may call it red, as he was only a boy, and nobody took much

pains to be polite to him, or to mince matters with regard to his personal appearance ; his grey-green eyes and freckled face generally wore a pleasant, good-natured expression, and looked at all times decidedly intelligent, though much older than his size seemed to warrant, except, indeed, his feet and hands, which were disproportionately large.

‘ A storm brewing ? ’ echoed Janet quickly, looking up from beating eggs and milk in a basin. ‘ What do you mean ? ’

‘ A storm,’ repeated Jack, nodding in a provokingly reticent manner ; ‘ don’t we all know what that means ? ’ and he grinned significantly.

‘ Well, but what about, I mean ? ’ demanded Janet.

Jack here took upon himself to enter the kitchen, and Rachel, his elder sister, who

was always called Ella, looked sharply round. She was sitting by the fire with a big baby on her knee, warming its bare feet at the open grate.

‘Look at your dirty boots, Jack!’ cried she; ‘how *can* you get them into such a state, and then bring it all into the house?’

‘Not all,’ said Jack sulkily, looking at his boots; ‘there’s a good deal on the step; and besides, if you——’

‘Oh! and his hands!’ cried Ella, her eyes lighting on one which rested against the white-washed wall, whereby its little peculiarities were rendered unusually prominent; ‘positively *covered* with mud—nasty boy!’

Jack glared at her a moment and then flung out of the kitchen without another word, slamming the door behind him with violence, and singing defiantly at the top of

his voice as he tramped away across the back-yard.

‘Poor Jack!’ said Ella rather remorsefully, kissing the little step-sister on her knee. ‘But *isn’t* he tiresome?’

‘Yes,’ sighed Janet; ‘but I wish we knew what he meant. You may be sure you and I are in for something, or he would not have been so cheerful.’

‘I can’t think what it can be,’ mused Ella; ‘I’ve nothing much on my conscience just now—have you?’

‘My fowl-houses want cleaning,’ said Janet rather gloomily. ‘And what’s more, I must do them this afternoon.’

‘Jack will help you,’ suggested Ella:

‘No, he’s got the pigsty and cow-house to do; that reminds me—some of those children will have to herd the pigs in the field while he does it, or we shall have them

in the pound before one of us can say Jack Robinson.'

'I ought to be cleaning the plate now,' said Ella, jumping up. 'This child must go to bed. How fast Saturdays come round again, don't they? And there's my blessed greenhouse I must get done to-day—somehow. What a waste of life!' and she left the kitchen and went singing upstairs with the little one.

'A waste of life, indeed!' soliloquized Janet. 'Nothing seems to waste her life—always contrives to take it pretty easy and be cheerful. I suppose she is born for a happy fate;' and Janet beat the eggs more vigorously, and sighed as one who, without envying others their brighter destiny, has very little confidence in the future, but rather a dim foreboding of suffering, sacrifice, and disappointment. Her serious face,

with its high broad forehead and delicately chiselled features, wears in repose a look of slight depression, and the small fine mouth expresses a kind of suffering as well as great strength of will. She moves about her work with a certain heaviness, and her grey eyes have deep transparent shadows round them, as though her strength were constantly overtaxed.

She had just put the cake into the oven and turned to rouse up the fire, when the kitchen-door opened quickly, and her step-mother, Mrs. Worsley, slipped in, shutting it after her with expressive gestures of caution and alarm, and watching it for a few seconds as though she half expected it to open again.

‘Anything up?’ asked Janet, as she packed the coals well down through the hole in the top of the hot plate.

Mrs. Worsley held up a warning finger as manly steps passed along the carpetless passage outside, dignified by the name of 'hall ;' and when they had died away she relinquished the door-handle and came and sat upon the kitchen-table.

'That's the pastry-board you're sitting on,' observed Janet, without displaying much excitement.

'Dear, how nasty !' exclaimed Mrs. Worsley, dropping on to the floor and beating off some of the flour that whitened her gown ; she then sat down on another corner of the table.

'The master's in a frightful state of mind about the washing-bill,' she said, in a low tone.

'There's milk spilt there,' murmured Janet, with a glance at that part of the table which Mrs. Worsley had selected for a

seat; 'all the same a hundred years hence!' she added philosophically. 'About the washing-bill: it is pretty heavy, I know. Washing, however, is about the one thing we cannot do without.'

'He says he shan't pay it,' continued Mrs. Worsley; 'he says it's at the rate of a hundred a year. He says we're all as extravagant as we can be—that he slaves and wears himself out for us, and that we, instead of trying to make both ends meet, simply fling the money away right and left, and make ourselves comfortable. He brought up that wretched bill of Twigg and Butter's again.'

'Bug and Twitter!' laughed Janet, and it sounded rather disrespectful. 'He does work awfully hard—that's quite true,' she went on; 'the rest—h'm!—we've often heard it before.'

‘It’s over eighty pounds, you know,’ Mrs. Worsley continued ; ‘we shall never hear the last of it. What am I to do ? We *must* have clothes ; we *must* have our things washed. He forgets that there are seven children.’

‘Most blessed condition !’ laughed Janet. ‘I wish any of us could forget it sometimes.’

‘Of course the washing-bill comes to more than it did when there were only ourselves,’ said the young mother, sweetly ignoring Janet’s grim pleasantry. ‘I don’t know *what* to do.’

‘I don’t see where we can retrench,’ said Janet thoughtfully. ‘The children seldom look clean as it is ; I’m sure I don’t. Ella, in fact, is the only one of us that ever does look decent ; but then, it’s her nature to be tidy and bright.’

‘And extravagant,’ added Mrs. Worsley, with a little laugh.

‘Well, I doubt if she costs more than we do with it all,’ said Janet, standing up for her sister, whose little refinements made the ground of many a family accusation against her.

At this moment Ella came in with the plate-basket.

‘Thank heaven, Lottie has gone to sleep at last!’ said she. ‘I suppose there’s no chance of Jane’s doing this to-day?’ she asked, setting it down, and taking wash-leathers, brushes, and whitening out of a drawer, and looking with an air of reluctance from the grey leathers to her own dainty hands.

‘Oh *dear*, no!’ said Mrs. Worsley, with the very faintest infusion of contempt and reproof, and Ella buckled to in silence.

Then Janet explained matters about 'the wretched washing,' as she called it, and they both looked at Ella for a suggestion.

'How annoying!' said Ella. 'Why, I wanted to send my green and white cotton gown this week, and a white petticoat—in fact, they *must* go!'

Janet looked uneasy, and Mrs. Worsley was grave and silent.

'I wish the master would stop things before they get to this pass,' Ella said presently. 'It's just the same with Twigg and Butter; he lets us get all our new things there, and you know if *he* chooses them, they're sure to be the most expensive things in the shop, and then he rows and storms, and objurgates over the bill.'

This was true enough, but it did not mend matters, and the other two merely looked gloomy.

‘I suppose Janet and I had better go out as governesses,’ said Ella rather savagely. ‘I always thought it would come to that. For my part, I don’t see that the dignity of trying to live at home on a red herring a day is much to be preferred to it. The sooner we go the better, and then we shall get used to it before we’re too old.’

‘The master wouldn’t hear of it,’ said Mrs. Worsley decidedly; ‘and I should not like it at all. All your mother’s people would immediately look askance at me, and say, “That is the doing of the second wife.”’

‘Pooh!’ exclaimed Janet, ‘let them say what they like. Surely you wouldn’t mind their being so absurd! Nobody could complain of our doing something for ourselves without making themselves so foolish that we needn’t regard their opinions.’

Young Mrs. Worsley shook her head. She was only some six or seven years older than her step-daughters, and their mother's relations, as such will be, were jealous of her and of her supposed interference in their affairs.

Suddenly the three started into listening attitudes ; a manly step, taking large strides, was heard drawing nearer through the hall.

‘He’s coming !’ whispered the girls in suspense.

‘Fly !’ exclaimed Mrs. Worsley under her breath, suiting the action to the word, and darting out at the back-door, followed by the girls, across the yard, and round behind the cow-house into the woodshed.

When Mr. Worsley looked into the kitchen there was no one there ; the plate-basket stood defenceless upon the table, the

farther door stood open to invite the casual thief, and a strong smell of burning issued from the oven. He uttered an impatient exclamation of annoyance and vexation, and retired, slamming the door.

It was a door—let me say this in his excuse—that one could hardly help slamming, for, though it did not nearly reach the floor at the bottom, it always stuck tight at the top, and had a way of swinging slowly open with a deliberate and irritating squeak just when one had got a couple of yards away from it under the serene impression that one had shut it. Of course it was but natural to take it out of the door when one had to go back after it.

Meanwhile, the three fugitives in the stick-house leant breathless against the faggots, laughing at themselves for the fright they were in.

‘It’s all very well to laugh,’ said Mrs. Worsley ruefully ; ‘I wish I was dead ! I seem only to bring trouble and expense, and never do any good !’

Her voice quivered, though she still tried to smile, and the girls felt their hearts smite them for their manifold allusions to the seven children, and to the general poverty that seemed to have overtaken them of late years.

‘I’ll tell you what,’ said Janet, ‘“As well be hung for a sheep as a lamb !” We’ll put down the slave. Jane, you know, goes next week ; we haven’t found another ; we’ll go without. There’s nothing she has to do that we couldn’t all do better.’

‘No,’ said Ella. ‘What’s the use of our superior education if it unfits us for real hard work ?’

‘We *should* be fools if we couldn’t scrub

a floor or black a grate as well as one of these miserable maids of all work !' exclaimed Janet, laughing.

' *He* won't object, I suppose,' said Ella, moving to the door and looking out across the fields, 'as long as the work is properly done, and no money asked for.'

'The last man !' laughed his wife rather bitterly. 'But how about the washing ?'

'Do it at home,' said Janet promptly.

They looked at each other ; there was a moment's hesitation at the bottom of their hearts, but it gave way.

'Oh yes !' they cried with enthusiasm. 'There are those two grand coppers in the back-kitchen *never* used——'

'Except for making the dogs' porridge,' put in Janet, 'and keeping the children's odd boots in.'

'Ah ! well, they're easily cleared out,'

said Ella brightly. 'We shall get the place into something like order when once the maid is off the premises.'

'Well !' sighed Mrs. Worsley, 'I must go. I haven't dusted the drawing-room yet ; the master made such a commotion about the bills that I escaped as soon as I could. We're very late to-day.' And so saying, she rose and tripped away.

'Yes,' said Janet softly, with scorn in her tones, 'we're very late to day, and we were very late yesterday, and as many days before that as we can remember, and so we shall be to-morrow.'

Ella sighed audibly and coloured a little, and Janet contemplated her thoughtfully from the faggot where she sat.

Janet was the only early riser of them all, and her sister's delinquencies on this point were a great source of annoyance to

her; it was trying to have one whom she so dearly loved and also greatly admired failing egregiously in the matter of turning out of bed in the morning. The vexation in her face gave way, however, to a wistful expression half of envy, half of despair, as she looked up at Ella's bright face and glowing hair—hair which sprang into waves and curls wherever it could contrive to escape from its ribbon and its plaits, and caught new hues with every gleam of light; whose colour was neither gold nor red, nor had one thread of brown in it or of yellow; whose shadows were more purple than anything else, whose lights were simply indescribable. Jack called it bay, and said that her eyelashes being black proved it, 'because,' he added, 'a bay horse always has black continuations.'

'Ella,' said Janet, 'you have stolen all

the good things of the family, and only left the refuse to be divided amongst the rest of us.'

Ella glanced from the early April fields into the dimness of the stick-house with a surprise that was not all unfeigned, for she had not lived to be nineteen without suspecting that she possessed a certain amount of attractiveness.

'I?' laughed she.

'Yes,' said Janet rather moodily; 'you seem to have gleaned up every little talent and grace and colour that could be turned to account. Look at your hands, and look at ours——'

'Because I take care of them,' interrupted Ella.

'Well, and your hair——'

'Yours is very much prettier!' exclaimed Ella. 'Nobody could call it red, as they do

mine—a soft, warm brown, shot with gold.’

‘And you never have a day’s illness; always singing and whistling and laughing; doing pretty things, playing or painting, arranging flowers or embroidering—I can’t do any of those things.’

‘But your carving beats all my rubbishy fiddling and dabbling to sticks!’ cried Ella, ‘and you’re ever so much cleverer; look how you beat me at Latin and German! What’s more,’ she added recklessly, ‘you’ll go to heaven, Janet, and I never shall.’

‘Don’t!’ said Janet, getting up; ‘you will if you choose to take the trouble. I suspect my cake is burnt to a cinder by this time.’

‘Bother! and I must clean the silver—it’s twelve already!’ exclaimed Ella. ‘Come on, Janet.’

‘I must just see what Buffy is doing in that run ; she ought to have laid to-day,’ said Janet, going into the paddock where she kept her fowls.

‘I shall go,’ said Ella, who had no affinities with her sister’s feathery favourites ; ‘but, Janet !’

‘What ?’ came half smothered from the fowl-house.

‘We can’t begin the new *régime* until Jane is gone.’

‘Of course not.’

‘Nor yet the washing,’ pursued Ella—
‘not with her grinning at us.’

‘I suppose not, but I feel easier in my mind,’ replied Janet, emerging from the fowl-house with a warm buff egg in her hand, ‘now that we have resolved on our plan of action.’

‘The Draycotes must never hear of it,’

observed Ella, as they went into the house together.

‘Ye gods!’ laughed Janet. ‘No, indeed! What a groaning and shrieking and outcry there would be!’

‘I wonder how long it is likely to last,’ mused Ella, proceeding to turn up her sleeves and smear whitening on to the silver spoons.

‘What! are you fainting already?’ asked Janet.

‘No, but I am nineteen, you know,’ replied Ella, with a little laugh. ‘I shouldn’t like to think it would go on for ever.’

‘Then probably it’s lucky for us that we can’t see into the future,’ said Janet grimly.

‘Well, I should like to marry some day,’ said Ella simply.

‘Then you will, I suppose,’ her sister answered; ‘you always have what you like.’



CHAPTER III.

‘ Unser Wirthschaft ist nur klein,
Und doch will sie versehen sein.
Wir haben keine Magd ; muss kochen, fegen, stricken
Und nähn, und laufen früh und spät.

* * * * *

Und immerfort wie heut so morgen.
Da geht's, mein Herr, nicht immer muthig zu ;
Doch schmeckt dafür das Essen, schmeckt die Ruh.’

Faust.

‘ **D** O-O-O-ON’T, Gog !’ was the
sound that broke the stillness
of early morning in the
chamber where slept Ella and Janet and
two of the younger children—Madge, aged
five, and Godfrey aged four. These two
occupied each an end of one single bed,

and were given to rousing one another with kicks from time to time.

‘*Madge!*’ came with intense emphasis from between Godfrey’s teeth, accompanied by an exasperated spasm under the blankets.

‘Naughty, cruel boy!’ whimpered Madge with another spasm, quickly followed by one from Godfrey, then another from herself, with ejaculations of wrath and indignation on both sides, till the sheets and blankets were reduced to a forlorn heap on the floor, and four little bare feet were kicking vigorously on the mattress.

‘Be quiet, you two!’ said Janet peremptorily, without opening her eyes; and there was a silence of three minutes, except for the rapturous singing of early birds floating in at the open window.

Then it began again, *sotto voce*, but *crescendo*.

‘Go-o-o-g!’ and a kick.

‘Mag-gie!’ and another kick.

‘Wicked, cruel boy!’ and a still more vigorous kick.

Then Gog sprang up, administered a thump on the head to his adversary, and by the time her yell broke upon the air, was apparently fast asleep at his end of their common couch, snoring profoundly with uncomfortably quivering eyelids, in spite of the fact that all their coverings lay on the floor.

His brief slumbers, however, were rudely disturbed by a smart spank from a slipper and Janet’s severe voice saying :

‘It’s curious—singularly curious—that neither of you two seems to care about coming primrosing to Sunley Woods to-day.’

At this sarcastic remark there was a short pause of dismay, and then both children began to roar in a desolate and heart-broken manner.

‘You’d better leave off that hullabaloo!’ observed Janet in a tone that seemed to suggest that all was not yet lost, and deep quiet ensued.

‘There’s an end of rest,’ murmured Janet as the alarum clock that hung over her pillow went off, announcing half-past five, time to get up.

She flung on a dressing-gown, and went out across the passage to call Jack.

‘Easter Eve, Jack!’ she said, knocking at the door and eliciting a weary, smothered groan; ‘birds singing, sun shining, dew on the grass; going to be a glorious day—the very thing for primrosing and Sunley. Jack!’ Another feeble and very unenthusi-

astic groan. ‘*Do* get up! There’s so much to be done before we can get off. Jack!’

‘All right,’ responded Jack more manfully; and she heard him tumble out on to the floor, and went back to her room.

‘Ella! (I shall never get *her* up,’ she murmured). ‘Ella! primroses! Sunley Woods! All the children to wash and dress, breakfast to make, hamper to pack—Ella!—all the boots to clean, and the tart to make for to-morrow! There’s Jack gone down already,’ she added, after an interval of five minutes—the modest time allowed himself by her worthy brother for the performance of his very simple toilet; ‘I must fly!’ and she proceeded to hurry through her dressing, while Ella slept on as though nothing had happened.

At six Janet was ready.

‘Now, Ella,’ said she, as she tied on a large coarse apron, ‘I’m going down, and I must take the clock. It’s six, and you’d better get up.’ With that she left the room and went down.

The maid had left them a day or two before, and they had watched her departure from the drawing-room window with mingled feelings, much as mariners on a new land might watch the flames consuming their ships.

‘A good riddance of bad rubbish!’ Jack had said, and said with feeling, for he always quarrelled with the maid.

‘Now we shall have some peace and comfort!’ said his sisters. ‘Now we shall be masters in the house! Now things will be properly done, and we shan’t feel that a hireling is sitting eating her head off in the kitchen, and having buttered toast for break-

fast while we eat bread and dripping. Hurrah for the new *régime* ! Hurrah for liberty !'

Liberty is a very fine thing, and admirable to hurrah about, but it must be confessed that even Janet, with all her heroism and self-denial, did not enjoy all the results of their revolution, glorious though it was. To go down the creaking stairs when the rest are warm asleep and let the first daylight into rooms that you last saw by lamp and firelight, of whose genial warmth and glow nothing now remains but ghastly ashes and an oppressive smell of paraffine, is not a pleasant task, especially when the mornings are cold. When you are ready to sit down to hot coffee and clean bread and butter, what can be harder than to have to brush out your grate and light—if you can light—a fire, and then, while it pretends to burn, to have to clear away, as Janet

did this morning, the remains of last night's supper—the cheese, a jug and tumblers smelling faintly of beer, a mince-pie nibbled all round by a midnight mouse, and the little saucepan in which they had made chocolate for the master.

As she entered the kitchen by one door, Jack, followed by Ban and Hardigras, two handsome and portentous-looking mastiffs, entered from the backyard at the other with a pail in his hand.

‘I’ve filled the ducks’ water-pans and the cow’s trough, and fed the pigs,’ he said, with a happy, business-like air, flinging down the pail on the mat, and giving it a kick that was quite superfluous and uncalled for, just to show his general superiority, ‘and I’ve opened the frame; it’s up to eighty, and my gourds are coming up grandly. Let me carry out those cinders

for you,' he added, as Janet began to rake out the grate and shovel up the ashes into the empty scuttle.

'All right, thank you; and bring it back full of coals as quick as you can, Jack. I want to feed those fowls, only I must just get the fire under way first.'

'I'll feed the beasts,' said Jack eagerly.

'No you won't,' replied his sister; 'thank you all the same. Be off with those cinders!'

'Oh, very well!' exclaimed the boy, snatching up the scuttle resentfully, and dashing off with it, precipitating about half its contents on to the floor as he went.

'See what you've done!' cried poor Janet. 'I had better by half have done it myself.'

'Well,' retorted Jack sulkily, setting down his burden again, 'you shouldn't fill it so beastly full.'

‘There’s nothing beastly about the fullness of a coalscuttle,’ said Janet, as she swept up the cinders.

‘Yes there is, when it makes a mess all over the place like that,’ argued Jack, looking on.

‘You did that,’ retorted his sister significantly.

‘Oh yes, of course,’ began Jack sulkily, resuming the scuttle and walking slowly to the door, ‘Jack’s beastly; his clothes are beastly; his hands are beastly; but not the dear, sweet coalscuttle; not the charming, innocent little ducks of cinders!’ Here he set down the articles in question, clasped his hands theatrically, and cast his eyes heavenward with an air of abject servility. ‘Oh no! Let us be particular about our adjectives while we turn our good-for-nothing brother into a beast of burden.’

‘Ass, Jack!’ cried Janet, snatching up the shovel and aiming a playful blow at the top of his head. ‘*How* you waste the time! I might have done it twice over while you stand there arguing.’

‘You began it,’ retorted Jack, evading the shovel and taking flight across the yard, hopping on one foot, and of course sending the cinders flying about his path in all directions. ‘I empty it as I go, to save the precious time,’ he called out, on finding nothing in it when he reached the coal-house door, and Janet heard him performing ‘Over the Garden Wall’ in his own noisy but not unmusical manner, while she turned to and laid the fire.

‘Now, Jack,’ she said, looking at the clock when he came back, ‘you must go for the milk—five pints will be enough of skim, and one of new for Lottie. I shall

give them all bread and milk for breakfast to save time; and if there's enough over, I'll make a blanc-mange for to-morrow.'

'Blue monge!' interrupted Jack appreciatively. 'I'll bring you in the laurel-leaves.'

'Well, make haste,' said his sister; 'there are the cans.'

'My wig! how shiny!'

'Ella cleaned them yesterday—be off!'

'All right—it's just twenty to seven. How long d'ye bet it takes me to go there and back? What d'ye bet me I won't be here within the quarter?'

'Oh yes! and all the milk spilt on the road!' laughed Janet. 'A good box on the ear, not to say two.'

'Then I box your ears if I'm late; all right; very neat arrangement! Good-bye, my lovely creature!' and Jack danced out

of the kitchen to the rattle of the milk-cans, and set off down the road at a furious pace, accompanied by Ban and Hardigras barking and jumping round him.

‘Come, the water’s getting hot at last,’ observed Janet, talking to herself, and trying its temperature by the simple expedient of dipping her fingers into the boiler ; ‘now for my fowls !’ and she began mixing up their mash of meal under the boiler-tap.

‘I’d better see what Ella is about, perhaps, before I go out,’ she said, looking meditatively at the steaming pail and the fire. ‘Those brats are making row enough, at any rate !’

So saying, she went to the foot of the stairs.

‘Ella ! the water’s hot !’

‘All right,’ responded Ella, leaning over

the banisters in a blue dressing-gown; 'I'm just ready. You little ones must lie still till I come up with the bath-water. Stella, that is Nora's petticoat that you're putting on; take it off. Sidney, your knickerbockers are hindside before—you can't wear them like that; when *will* you learn to dress yourselves?'

'I don't know,' replied Sidney with humble simplicity, extricating himself awkwardly from his misplaced garment, in which process both his shoes came off and stuck in the elastic at the knees.

'What on earth is that sticking out at the top of your waistcoat behind?' demanded Ella, passing the door again on her way down.

'I don't know,' said the little boy, twisting his head and standing on tiptoe in the vain attempt to view himself from the rear.

‘Well, then, I’ll tell you,’ said Ella severely, though her mouth twitched with suppressed amusement; ‘it’s the tail of your shirt, and that’s not the place for it.’

‘Oh!’ was the embarrassed rejoinder; and Sidney, with a sigh, set painfully about reorganizing the attire which had already cost him so much pains to put on.

When Ella went into the kitchen she found Janet and Jack indulging in mutual recriminations over the milk.

‘Good-morning, Quilp!’ said she to her brother, with an air of good-natured superiority.

‘Good-morning, Sally Brass!’ returned Jack, and went on to Janet. ‘You said five quarts of skim——’

‘I didn’t, I said pints; only you were so busy making an idiot of yourself that you couldn’t attend.’

‘Well, it’s only a beggarly twopence-halfpenny when it’s biled and the skin took off; I’ll drink it—or why not make a thundering blue monge of it? Or—I’ll tell you what! bottle it, and take it to Sunley with us!’

‘Quilp, my beloved,’ said Ella, reaching down a large jug for hot water, ‘will you have the gallantry to open the greenhouse for me, and to water everything?’

‘Anything to please my lovely Sally,’ responded Quilp demonstratively, and was going into the hall when Ella took alarm.

‘You’re not thinking of going through the drawing-room in those boots, I *should* hope! And do you mean to tell me that you went down the village with your prolongations tied up like that?’ pointing at Jack’s trousers, which he chose to wear girt in just below the knees with a ragged piece

of string—tarred line for choice—in beautiful imitation of the labouring men of his acquaintance.

‘I don’t mean to tell you anything about them,’ said Jack, glancing tenderly at his extremities and then regarding his sister with his most aggravating air.

‘Well, you look quite sufficiently caddish without that, let me tell you. You needn’t be afraid of people finding out that you’re a gentleman.’

‘Oh! how I do like to hear you two going on!’ said Jack, grinning in the doorway. ‘I wonder if either of you ever expects to be taken for a lady! Nurse-girl and hen-wife—that’s about what you’re fit for.’

‘And you’re the dirty odd-job-boy-about-the-place,’ said Ella, pushing him out of her way by applying the hot jug to his nose.

‘I say, we shall get no breakfast to-day if you two can’t leave off squabbling for an hour,’ put in Janet.

‘I’m smit all of a heap at the bare idea,’ protested Jack, falling back against the passage-wall with his eyes shut and his tongue out.

This might easily have gone on for hours had not sounds of wild confusion amongst the children upstairs caused Ella to rush up after them.

‘Maggie won’t say her prayers!’ exclaimed Nora with flaming cheeks, as Ella entered the room, giving her shock of tawny hair a general backward push with both hands and looking almost as guilty as her victim who stood beside one of the beds with an expression wavering between piety and sullenness, as she inclined either to say her prayers or to refuse. Nora was two

years older than Madge, and made the most of her authority.

‘Maggie is an obstinate pig!’ remarked Godfrey from inside the bed, putting in his oar.

‘Ella, it was Gog’s fault,’ interposed Stella, the eldest of the seven. Every time Nora got Maggie down on her knees he stuck up his foot under the bedclothes in front of her and made her laugh.’

Godfrey, on this, assumed an expression of guilt and remorse until he saw that Ella was paying no attention to any of them, when it instantly vanished and his usual devil-may-care look settled down upon his small round face.

In half an hour ‘the whole boiling,’ as their elders called them, had gradually and in instalments found their way down to the breakfast-table and were doing execution

in various styles upon their bowls of bread and milk.

Godfrey, being as he thought pressed for time, began his kneeling on his high stool ; he had just contrived to lodge the contents of a monstrous spoon half upon his pinafore and the rest chiefly in his mouth—if we don't count what was left upon his cheeks and on the glistening tip of his nose—when Sidney interfered effectively by tripping up the stool and its occupant and bringing both with a crash and a yell to the floor.

‘ That’s not the way to eat your breakfast, Gog,’ remarked he, quite in the dry, judicial style of his betters.

Godfrey scrambled up and ran after him round the table, spoon in hand ; Nora made grabs at their hair as they passed with enterprise and impartiality ; Stella, absorbed in more important thoughts, ate on in

silence and oblivion of all that was passing ; Madge gazed, amused, upon the scene with spoon suspended and mouth wide open.

‘ Now, you little fools ! ’ cried Jack’s voice, suddenly putting an end to the tumult, ‘ you’d better sit down in your places before Ella and Janet come, or you’ll one and all be skinned alive ; no going to Sunley then ! ’

The force of this observation was not lost upon his hearers, and the scene was tolerably orderly and peaceful when the two elder sisters came in.

‘ I’ll just take up mamma’s chocolate,’ said Janet, peeping in and disappearing again.

Mrs. Worsley was delicate, and seldom came down to breakfast.

‘ We never all sit down in comfort together,’ sighed Ella, as she poured out the coffee. ‘ Jack, what *did* become of the post-man ? ’

‘Postman? Why, I suppose he’s on his way to Brackenbury by this time.’

‘Yes, of course; but weren’t there any letters?’

‘Letters? Didn’t you go to him?’ asked Jack, stuffing his mouth unusually full to conceal his embarrassment.

‘I’m sure there’s a letter for me, Jack, or you wouldn’t bother and prevaricate like that. You may as well give it me,’ said Ella, inclining to coax a little, yet not sure that Jack was going to be amenable.

Jack took a letter out of his pocket and began to study the address with a critical air.

Ella’s quick eye recognised the writing at once.

‘It’s from Lady Draycote—I see it, Jack—give it to me at once. An invitation, perhaps! Oh, Jack! I call you a fiend!’

‘Oh ! you do, do you !’ remarked the boy with a wink, stuffing the letter back into his pocket. ‘Amiable Sally Brass !’

‘Quilp, you’re an angel !’ said Ella, laughing in order to keep her temper ; ‘hand it here, please.’

‘Take it !’ cried Jack at last, and threw it at her.

It went into the slop-basin, and all the children screamed with delight and looked at Jack with admiration. Ella scarcely noticed where it fell, but picked it up, opened it, and glanced hastily through it.

‘Janet !’ she cried, as her sister passed the door, ‘an invitation to Draycote House—for me—the week after next. Oh ! if I could only go !’

Janet went cautiously upstairs with Mrs. Worsley’s breakfast, and presently came back.

‘Oh, you *must* go!’ said she, sitting down at last. ‘It’ll be your first glimpse of a regular London season.’

‘I feel quite shaky at the bare idea,’ said Ella; ‘but we must talk it over on the way to Sunley. Now, children, come along; who’s ready?’





CHAPTER IV.

‘Like driftwood spars, which meet and pass
Upon the boundless ocean plain,
So on the sea of life, alas !

Man meets man—meets, and quits again.’

MATTHEW ARNOLD.

HAVING divided the available straw hats of the family amongst the children, brushed up the perambulator, packed the little hamper, and let out the mastiffs, away they all went up the hill in grand spirits, with a good four miles of walk before them ere they could reach the welcome shade of Sunley Woods.

Ella and Janet had just changed hands

at the wheeling of the two children in the perambulator, and Jack was proposing to lead the two dogs for the present, lest, tempted by erratic squirrels, they should dash off into the pine-woods on either side, and get their owners into difficulties for disturbing the game, when they descried a light cart approaching rapidly with the village carpenter's son in it, and, alas! his black retriever careering merrily alongside.

Ban and Hardigras, as befitted their rank and station, were dogs of large and tolerant mind ; but there was that in their history which led them to regard a black curly dog as their natural enemy. The bristles rose forbiddingly along their backs and lion-like necks, insults were exchanged—they bit their thumbs, so to speak, at each other, and took no pains to disguise it.

Long before Jack or anybody else could catch them, they were rolling over in clouds of dust, and the air was hideous with a roaring as of wild beasts.

Much good it was to bawl out 'Ban!' 'Hardigras!' Likely it was that they would hear! Jack dashed forward and tugged at their collars; but one might as well match one's weight against that of a bull, to say nothing of the extra risk of being bitten.

Joe, the carpenter's son, stood up in his cart, feeling only tolerably safe, and looking pale with fright.

'Call off your dog!' cried Jack.

'Call off *yours*!' retorted young Joe.

'Get down and use your whip!' cried Janet, astonished at his inaction.

'I daren't,' he said; 'they might turn upon me.'

Janet laughed at him.

‘Give *me* the whip then!’ said she scornfully ; but the dogs, if they felt it at all, must each have thought it was his enemy biting him, and they only redoubled their awful energy. At last, however, they simultaneously decided that they had had enough, and the two victors drew off with gory jaws all fringed with alien wool, and left the retriever singing very small indeed in the ditch.

Janet turned to and thrashed them.

‘Carry off your wretched dog!’ cried Jack. But the pallid youth declined to adventure his person in the arena, and elected to wait till the Worsleys and their retinue were at a safe distance.

‘I’ll certy-count you for this ’ere!’ shouted he, as they drew off.

‘Hark at the fool!’ laughed Jack ; and

the girls promised to go slowly if he would just take the dogs home again and shut them up.

‘ You see it rather wastes the time and spoils the fun,’ they all said, feeling that now that their blood was up the two would be for taking the life of every dog whom chance might bring their way without considering too curiously whether he was black enough and curly enough to warrant his execution.

They were all very hot and tired by the time they reached the bowers of Sunley, and here Jack’s good spirits came to their aid.

‘ Stella and I can tackle the grub,’ said he, in his best manner, pushing the big perambulator into the middle of a large clump of rhododendrons to hide it from the passer-by, and emerged with a large basket and a tin or two. ‘ Come on, Stella ! heave

out those bottles—and take care you don't smash them, for that milk cost twopence-halfpenny, and we shall all have to go short for a week to catch it up again !'

'Then we'll begin primrosing,' said Ella, turning off with Janet down a grassy glade where the primroses grew plentifully.

'Gently, gently, now !' Ella cried, as with shouts of delight the little ones let themselves loose upon the flowers. 'Long stalks, mind, and plenty of leaves ; and don't all try to gather the same primrose. Now, Janet, let's rest a little. Isn't this heavenly ?' and the sisters sat down together on one of the mossy hillocks at their feet, and Janet lay right back and gazed up at the blue breezy sky and sailing clouds crossing the open space above, beyond the young green boughs of the beeches.

‘Divine!’ Janet murmured, closing her eyes; ‘all the air is faint with primroses. Where else, I wonder, does one hear nightingales singing in the full blaze of noon?’

‘It makes one feel rather mad, and wild, and unhappy though,’ sighed Ella. ‘The more you have, the more you want.’

‘That sounds oracular. How do you mean?’

‘Why, when I’m cooking, or washing dishes, or blacking boots, I feel quite contented and happy, and altogether hopeful. But here, where all is peace and sweetness, I feel almost as if I were possessed. I suppose I don’t notice my general feeble incapability when I’m only drudging, but here it *does* come over me.’

‘Well, you see,’ replied Janet, ‘while we’re working we feel we’re doing our duty,

which always helps to make one cheerful ; but when we get a lull like this, and feel that torment—the presence of a soul for better things within us, and compare what might be with what is, and feel that it is imprisoned and being stifled and worn out in the ignoble labour for the meat which perisheth—ah ! well, we must hope it won't last for ever,' Janet broke off rather abruptly.

‘ I don't feel so sure of the better things,’ said Ella wearily ; ‘ I don't know what I'm fit for, and yet I am always longing and wearying for something that never comes.’

‘ Perhaps this visit to the Draycotes may set you up,’ suggested Janet. ‘ We shall have to work like tigers to get your clothes ready. It's lucky we got our new things before the explosion, isn't it ?’

‘ The explosion ’ was the term they

used to describe the period of storm and stress through which they had passed about quarter-day, when the dreaded bills came in.

‘Yes, very. But, Janet, our *poor* novels! When shall we ever be able to write again?’

‘I don’t know,’ said the philosophical Janet. ‘When it is good for us to go on, I suppose we shall find the time. Don’t you find that you have many more ideas when you’re so hard worked that you scarcely know which way to turn? I do.’

‘Yes, and what’s the good?’ sighed Ella. ‘Seems to me to mean that nobody wants our higher powers as long as common work can be got out of us. They are just given us to cheat and tantalize us and make us miserable—seems to be the object of most things in this life.’

‘So it does, mostly ; but even while you’re saying that, doesn’t a strong conviction of the reality of the next life make you feel it unreasonable to murmur at this “which is but for a moment”?’

‘That doesn’t console me a bit,’ said Ella, ‘except on Sundays, when I’m in an unnaturally celestial frame of mind and can believe anything. It is exasperating to think that not only does this life consist chiefly of dulness and disappointment, but that one cannot reasonably wish for anything else.’

Janet closed her eyes again, and evidently did not think it worth while to offer any more consolation. To herself, however, she said confidentially, ‘Ah! I know my bird’ (Janet’s phraseology, though expressive, was apt, as we shall see, to be homely, not to say coarse, for a young lady); ‘I know

my bird. She is not really in this condition of black despair, nor half so near it as I am habitually. But I won't grudge her her little illusions.'

There was silence, therefore, for a space, and the two lay extended on the moss with their broad hats pulled over their faces, and pondered the mysteries of life.

'You look like a couple of squashed toadstools,' said Jack's disrespectful voice. 'We've laid out the grub.'

'How about that coffee?' asked Janet, sitting up.

'I've made a place for the fire,' said Jack eagerly. 'Come and see. Ella will lie here till all the dirty work is done, I suppose—eh, Miss Rachel?'

'Yes; call me when you're quite ready,' said Ella, under her big hat, and the other two went away.

Presently Ella heard footsteps drawing nearer, stumbling in an uncertain and jerky way over the moss, and making a crackling of dead sticks ; then some one knelt down beside her, lifted her hat stealthily, and thrust a bunch of warm fragrant primroses into her face.

‘Is that you, Nora?’ asked Ella, opening her eyes, and seeing a brilliant vision of rosy cheeks and ruddy curling hair between the primroses and the sky.

‘Yes ; *look* at my bunch, Ella!’

‘Sublime! Do you love me, Nora?’

‘Yes.’

‘How much, you horrid fat thing?’

‘A great deal.’

‘Show me how much.’

Nora carefully put down her flowers, and then flung herself demonstratively upon her sister, regardless of hat and hair, thrusting

her fat arms tightly round her neck, and giving her a tremendous hug.

‘There!’ she uttered, quite out of breath; ‘I love you all that, and Goggie’s lost.’

‘Goggie lost? Nonsense!’ said Ella, in momentary alarm.

‘He says he’s perfectly sure he is,’ said Nora earnestly.

‘Where is he?’

‘In that big rhododendron bush,’ replied Nora, pointing to a mass of green boughs in a hollow.

‘Oh! go and tell him he’ll get no dinner till he is found again. And call the others to come too.’

Nora obeyed, and ran down the slope, and in a few minutes the scattered children began to find their way to where the little feast was spread under a big tree.

Janet and Jack had withdrawn to a little

distance, and were painfully trying to boil some water by means of a little kettle and a spirit-lamp in a hole under a stump.

‘It’s this confounded wind that blows the flame all over the place,’ remarked Jack ; ‘the water’s stone-cold still.’

‘We must shelter it more,’ said Janet patiently ; when suddenly Jack in a loud whisper cried ‘*Cave !—cave !*’ and promptly flung himself flat upon the trembling flame and gingerly-balanced kettle, destroying the whole arrangement, spilling the water and the spirit, and extinguishing the flame.

Janet looked round hurriedly, and was aware of a slight, youngish man strolling leisurely towards them over the mossy knolls between the trees, swinging a stick in his hand, and evidently taking an interest in what they were about.

Guilt, confusion, and suspense were

painted upon Jack and Janet's ingenuous faces ; Ella, all unconscious of danger, lay stretched at full length with her hat over her face, Nora sitting beside her with a lapful of primroses, gazing at the approaching stranger with placid interest.

The other children sat about near where the little feast was spread, their hats flung aside, the sunlight dancing through the leaves upon their bright hair and flushed faces and the heaps of flowers, and they all suspended their work of making up bunches and stared at the stranger as he went by ; only Godfrey, with his usual irreverent audacity, called out delicately, half afraid of being heard, yet loth not to be :

‘ Hullo, old fellow !’

The ‘ old fellow,’ who before had seemed inclined, on the whole, to pass inoffensively by, interested though he was, now halted in

the middle of them all with a shy smile on his face and looked from one to the other, addressing himself finally to Jack, whose manner wavered between the aggressive and the 'caught-in-the-very-act.'

'I don't think you need be alarmed about your little fire there,' said he; 'it can't do any damage.'

'It's only a spirit-lamp,' declared Jack, getting up and shaking himself to dislodge the dead leaves and earth that clung to his clothes, much reassured by the friendly tone in which the words were spoken, and disposed at once to be communicative. 'I know it can't do any harm, only we thought it safer not to let every passer-by notice what we were doing. You were too quick for us. I shouldn't like old Stick-in-the-mud to come by and catch us, though.'

‘ Who is “ old Stick-in-the-mud ” ? ’ asked the young man, as he examined their spirit-lamp.

‘ The fellow these woods belong to—Sir Somebody Something—I forget his name ; I dare say you know, though. But I don’t think he’s very likely to come by.’

‘ Oh no,’ said Janet confidently ; ‘ people never walk in their own woods, I believe.’

‘ Well, but I don’t see how you make coffee with this thing,’ observed their new acquaintance, changing the subject and bringing them back to the business in hand.

‘ Don’t you ? ’ cried Jack, in his excitable way ; ‘ easy as kissing. If you’ll wait a hap’orth I’ll show you—you’ll see us do it. Where are those beastly matches ? ’ This last in an audible aside to himself.

‘ Here,’ said Janet promptly ; and added

in another audible aside, 'They aren't beastly, Jack.'

'Well, shove 'em here!' he said magnanimously, ignoring her correction for once, and then between them they soon re-kindled their fire.

'The thing is, you see,' began Jack, doing showman, 'to get the flame to burn up straight—only, you see——' here he altered some of his arrangements. 'A murrain upon the bea—ahem!—the wretched thing! it won't. Can't you sit that side, Janet, and keep the wind off?'

'*That* won't do any good, Gaby!' answered Janet, with her habitual politeness. 'Don't you see that it'll never burn as long as you don't take more trouble at the beginning? you must make a deeper hole.'

'Don't you think it might burn if you sheltered it with your hat?' suggested the

stranger. Then, however, his eye fell upon the thing Jack wore upon his head—a home-made article of green serge (part of an old gown of Janet's) trimmed round with the skin of a tabby cat, of his own killing, skinning, and curing, of which he was extremely proud, and which he wore at all seasons as long as his elders did not interfere. He had persisted in it so long now that it ceased to strike even their fastidious eyes, and he had come in it to-day without eliciting a single sneer or smart word from anybody.

‘Ahem! er—h’m! Perhaps mine?’ murmured the young man, kneeling down on the moss between them, and placing his hat judiciously so as to intercept the draught. The flame began then to burn steadily, and they watched it with breathless interest, Janet, however, finding leisure to remark

to herself that this young man must be much older than he looked at first, for the dark brown head that bent over the flame was sprinkled with grey.

‘It’s beginning ! It’s beginning !’ they all cried out suddenly, as the little kettle began to snore and sing, and the young man was quite as much excited as Jack, and looked round wildly for a coffee-pot.

‘Coffee-pot ! Bless you !’ exclaimed Jack, now all familiarity. ‘Ours is a much better dodge—I’ll ingratiate you ! Here, one of you brats ! Gog, give us that tin of coffee and the mug !’ he shouted.

Gog ran to obey, but was immediately fallen upon and collared by Nora. ‘He mustn’t touch the things !’ she cried, as they struggled and hit out at each other. ‘Goggie, you’re not to ! Ella said you were not to !’

‘Don’t quarrel, you two,’ said Ella, lying in lazy oblivion under her hat, ‘and don’t touch anything.’

Janet laughed, partly at Ella’s easy way of settling things; partly at the distressed expression with which their companion viewed the fight. ‘I’ll get them,’ she said; ‘be off, you two! You’ll get some food presently!’

‘Let me get them,’ interposed the young man, springing forward to help her.

‘Oh no! I can do it; please don’t trouble,’ said Janet stiffly, pursuing her way, all unused to be waited upon.

‘Do allow me! I can see you are tired,’ he persisted.

They were close to Ella, who was roused from her day-dreams by the unwonted sound of so much politeness and the accents of a manly voice.

When the voices had passed by she sat up, and looking in the direction of the fire, saw a strange young man and Jack and Janet standing side by side ; Jack with a decent wideawake hat in his hand ; Janet with the coffee-tin and a spoon, watching their companion who, bareheaded, was drinking coffee out of the mug—the only mug they had brought with them.

‘It’s first-rate,’ he declared. ‘You have indeed *ingratiated* me,’ he said, with mischievous emphasis on Jack’s word. ‘Let me get a cup for you’—this to Janet.

‘There isn’t one,’ said Janet bluntly.

‘No,’ added Jack ; ‘carriage is a consideration when you are your own beast of burden. We don’t mind.’

‘I am keeping you all from your food, I know,’ said the young man, evidently a little disconcerted about the cup. ‘Thank

you very much for the hospitality and the fun—I hope we may meet again some day.’

‘Do you live anywhere hereabouts?’ asked Jack, restoring the hat to its owner.

‘Well, yes, rather,’ replied the other doubtfully; ‘where do you live?’

‘About four or five miles off—Brackenbury way—a little hovel called The Roses, because, you know, there’s beech-trees in front. Do stay and have some of the grub—Janet made those rissoles—they’re tinned lobster; and Ella made the rolls—I recommend them. *Do!*’

‘I should like it very much,’ he said, with a frank, pleasant smile, ‘but I won’t, thank you. Good-bye;’ he lifted his hat, and seeing Jack and Janet each half extend a somewhat grubby hand, he shook hands heartily. ‘Good-bye,’ he said again, took a

few steps, hesitated, and then came back. 'Will you tell me your name?' he asked, half of Janet, though he looked chiefly at Jack, whom he appeared to find less embarrassing.

'My name?' repeated Jack (he always did repeat what you said to him before he would answer)—'my name? Bernard Worsley—Jack for common—Bernard when the governor's angry, or the girls have got their best things on—Jack when I'm cleaning out the pig-sty.'

'Ah! I see; very convenient that must be. Worsley—I shall remember it if we meet again.'

'What an idiot you were, Jack, not to ask *his* name!' whispered Janet, watching him as he walked away, lifting his hat to Ella as he passed her; 'why didn't you?'

‘Why didn’t I? Why didn’t you? What do I care about his name?’

‘You don’t mean to say you didn’t ask him when he gave you the chance?’ said Ella, joining them now, and following the retreating figure with her eyes.

‘I didn’t like to,’ replied Janet; ‘Jack might easily have done it. But never mind,’ she added, with a little sigh, ‘we never *shall* see him again, you know—we never do see anybody; so it doesn’t matter. Come on. Let’s have some food. Now, children—food!’





CHAPTER V.

‘How full of briars is this working-day world!’

As You Like It.

THE first thing the Worsleys heard when, with weary lagging steps, they dragged themselves and the children up to their own door, was that the carpenter’s dog was dead, and that young Joe, as they called him, had been up to The Roses to say that Worsley was to be sued for damages, unless he liked to pay them at once to the exorbitant tune of five pounds. Jack held his sides and roared extravagantly.

‘Why, the mongrel would be dear at a

gift!' cried he. 'I'll engage to get them another for three-and-six, which will be twice what this was worth.'

'What did you say to him, mamma?' asked the girls.

'Oh! I told him to call again,' answered Mrs. Worsley wearily; 'I'm sure there must be forty people with bills and complaints to whom I have said the same thing.'

'The deuce!' laughed Jack; 'let's hope they'll come when we're all out.'

'Has papa come home?' was the next inquiry, for Mr. Worsley, who was an artist, had gone away for a few days' sketching in the neighbourhood.

'No,' said his wife, 'he won't be here till midnight, I dare say. He works till it is nearly dark, and then he will have heaven knows how many miles to walk home. I shall sit up for him.'

‘I suppose we must ask the master about this invitation?’ said Ella that night, when the two girls were in their bedroom and she once more took out her aunt’s letter and read it through again.

‘Oh! of course you must ask him,’ answered Janet, who was already in bed; ‘but we know very well what he will say: “I object to your going—Lord Draycote has not behaved well to me. We are rat-poor—but I leave it to your conscience”—that is what he will say.’

‘Then I’d better give it up at once,’ said Ella reluctantly. ‘Only a week,’ she went on, ‘and the journey would cost very little—of course I should go third. I may as well ask him.’

‘And when he leaves it to your conscience you may as well go. It’s all bosh about the Draycotes’ not having

behaved well. I believe he thinks Lord Draycote ought to have put Roland and Jack to school, and brought us out and married us off, and perhaps settled something handsome upon us into the bargain. But, you know, on the subject of his neighbour's duty to him he really is a little mad. Lord Draycote is only our half-uncle, and, besides, he has half-a-dozen plain daughters of his own.'

Ella laughed.

'Yes,' she said, 'and the master never misses an opportunity of writing him a sarcastic letter, and saying something nasty. I wonder they ask us at all. But I'm dying to go. I've got two or three fairly decent gowns—they've seen them all before, but that can't be helped.'

'Can't be helped!' echoed Janet, who admired her sister from the bottom of her

heart. 'Why, that'll just set them longing to see them again! What could be prettier than your white embroidered muslin with sea-green ribbons, and the pearls?'

'The pearls' were a family heirloom, a beautiful and valuable set which had belonged to their mother, and which they either of them wore when occasion served.

'What an uproar Jack is making in there!' remarked Ella, pausing to listen to the stamping and clatter that was going on in the next room; 'he will wake Sidney and everybody else, and there'll be no peace to-night.'

'Well,' said Janet, 'I only know that if those children are but half as tired as I am, they'll not wake before morning. It's Jack's Saturday night's wash, you know,' she added, half asleep. 'You wouldn't grudge him that.'

‘I don’t see that he need make such a noise.’

‘It’s the pumice-stone,’ murmured Janet, ‘and he *will* use the whole bar of dog-soap instead of cutting a piece off. He says it feels more lordly.’

‘Lordly, indeed !’ laughed Ella. ‘As if a lord would be likely to use dog-soap at all !’

‘Do make haste to bed, Ella !’

‘I’ve got so awfully cold,’ said Ella, shivering, ‘and I’m not nearly ready—I’ve got all my tuckers to put in for to-morrow and my Lessons to read, and I’m half dead with sleep and cold already.’

‘Leave it all,’ murmured Janet, and fell asleep.

But Ella opened a drawer, hunted out some lace, and sat down with her gown and her workbox, and spent a good half-hour

putting in the lace. Then, when all that was done and put away, she opened her Bible and began to read the evening Lessons. She read a few lines, then the words all ran together and vanished; then she found them again and read a little more; then they vanished again, and she was asleep with her head against the chest of drawers, the Bible open on her knee, and the candle burning lower and lower. In a quarter of an hour she woke sneezing, colder than ever, and found the light just going out, flickering so that it was impossible to read, and the room filled with the smell of tallow-smoke.

So she gave up the attempt to read, and went and knelt down beside the little bed in the recess where Madge and Godfrey were sleeping.

The candle went out, the sounds in Jack's

room had ceased ; only the steady ticking of the clock over Janet's head, and the low breathing of the children broke the silence, except when a couple of benighted labouring men went by, singing snatches of some uncouth song ; and still Ella knelt on.

‘ Ella !’

No answer or movement.

‘ Ella !’

It was Janet calling her.

‘ Wnat, not in bed yet, and the candle out ? What is the good of it, Ella ? Get to bed. You'll catch your death of cold. I suppose you're quite stiff as usual ? *Orat qui bene laborat.*’

‘ Well, I hope that is true,’ said Ella wearily ; and Janet heard her sister's teeth chattering as she stole about the room trying to finish her toilet in the dark.

‘ You ought to do it in the daytime when

you've got your wits about you,' said Janet sleepily. 'I'm always telling you.'

'If only to-morrow were not Sunday!' ejaculated Ella when at last she laid her head on the pillow.

'Pious girl!' murmured Janet. 'Thank your star it isn't Monday!'

Soon after seven the next morning Janet was walking happily to church at Hawbourne, some three miles off, all in the early sunshine, exulting in the fresh morning air, the singing of the birds, the dew, the young leaves, the shadows on the beech-stems, the mist amongst the fir-woods.

The church was full of flowers, and smelt like a hothouse; azaleas, hyacinths, tulips, ferns, dracinas and beautiful foliage-plants banked up all the east end to right and left of the Altar; every window-sill in the nave was covered with primroses and daffodils,

and on every one of the graves outside, too, lay primroses and daffodils, first-fruits of the resurrection of the spring, smiling their own sweet silent promise to all who had eyes to see and hearts to understand.

At home the confusion on Sundays was always worse than on other days. To begin with, clean clothes had to be found for the children ; and when, as usual, these were not all forthcoming, they had to make shift with some of each other's things, when the owner of the garment in question always felt aggrieved, and the wearer ridiculous, and tears and sulks were the general result.

Then Ella had to keep shrieking out all dressing-time first to one and then to another to take care and keep clean ; not to put their best frocks on the floor ; not to drop their hair-ribbons into the bath ; not

to touch the pomatum ; not to put the wet towels on the bed, and so forth, till she felt quite hoarse, distracted, and ill-tempered. She had no sooner left them in order to fetch some hot water from the kitchen, than Stella came running down after her.

‘ Oh ! Do come up to Gog, Ella ! he has eaten all the new cold-cream, and he has been plastering his hair with pomatum and brushing it with the clothes-brush, and he won’t leave off !’

‘ Tell him I’m coming,’ said Ella, in an awful voice. ‘ And how often am I to tell you not to run about in your stockings without your shoes ?’

‘ I don’t know,’ answered Stella, somewhat subdued, and disappeared. The children always humbly replied to the sarcastic questions of their elders.

Ella felt almost ready to cry with the

worry of it—on Easter morning, too, and such a lovely day.

Besides, there was the breakfast to get ready, and herself and the two elder children to dress for church, and the drawing-room to dust; how was she ever to get it all done? And how was she to feel ‘like Easter’ afterwards.

Then Jack came in with the milk, looking quite nice in his dark-blue Sunday suit and his decent hat, his hair being well brushed, and his face unusually clean.

‘You look quite decent, Jack,’ said Ella, pleased at the rare sight, and feeling more sisterly than on week-days, when they were all too busy and too dirty to be affectionate.

‘Shall I make the cocoa and spread some bread and dripping?’ he asked, always ready to help.

‘Oh, if you only would!’ said Ella. ‘You’ll find a pot of pork-dripping in the larder. They’re not to have their eggs till tea-time, because it’s such a bother feeding them all, and they make such a dreadful mess of everything, and we should never get off to church.’

‘Is Janet gone to early service?’

‘Yes; she’s going to stay at home this morning and do the dinner, and look after the children.’

‘Ma going?’

‘Don’t know. I suspect not,’ answered Ella, taking up her jug of hot water. ‘She’s got frightful neuralgia, and has been up half the night with Lottie.’ So saying she went upstairs to the children.

Neither she nor Jack made any comment on the neuralgia or the bad night with the baby; they were so used to these things.

When Janet came in she found Jack giving the children their breakfast, with the exception of Goggie, who, glistening with pomatum, stood in the corner amusing himself by making greasy marks on the wall with his head, and cast a guilty and penitent look at her as she peeped in.

‘Ella not down?’ she asked.

‘She’s putting her gown on,’ said Nora; ‘and we’re all going to have eggs for tea.’

‘Don’t talk with your mouth full, Nora. Sidney, you’re not to bite your bread into patterns—I’ve told you so a hundred times. You really are the most maddening children——’

‘Oh!’ in a subdued voice, as the lovely viaduct of bread is sorrowfully devoured.

‘Sidney! Stella! If you want to go to church, come up directly and put on your things!’ cried Ella’s voice over the banisters,

and the two jumped off their high chairs and ran.

‘Come back and say your grace!’ said Janet. ‘Oh! and one of you has covered the door-handle with dripping. Go and wash your hands, and for heaven’s sake don’t touch anything. Get a cloth, Nora!’

‘My pinafore will do,’ said this obliging child.

‘Nasty little creature! Do what you are told,’ said Janet; ‘and Godfrey, come and eat your breakfast!’

This process of breakfast dragged on an interminable time. Never, as Ella remarked, did they all sit down together and have it in peace; one or other was certain to be called away, or to have to look after something in the kitchen; or just as they sat down, hens would be perceived scratching in the garden, and Jack would fling up

the window and dash after them with some of his own particular imprecations ; or they would hear something boiling over in the kitchen ; or they discovered that the knives had been forgotten, a child would be sent to fetch them and would omit to come back, and be found standing ‘wondering,’ and trying to make out what it had been sent to fetch. One or other of the children was always in disgrace, and from morning till night they had to be told not to do this, to leave off that, to do the other thing directly ; not to make so much noise ; not to jump the last four steps of the carpetless stairs ; to go and scrape their muddy boots ; not to wipe their dirty hands on their pinafores, and so on. And then, as Jack expressed it, ‘as fast as you choke ’em off one thing, they do something else, twice as bad.’

And children, unfortunately, cannot be

put away for a time, until the nerves of their keepers are more equal to the task of looking after them ; they are instant in season, out of season. If they are making a noise, you must stop them ; if they are quiet, you know they are in mischief ; if they are with you, you are impelled to turn them out of the room ; if you have turned them out, you must go and see what they are up to.

Everything that any of their elders did, said, or thought, was pervaded and influenced by these seven terrible children ; they formed the pivot on which everything turned ; everything followed or gave way to or shaped itself according to their requirements. Not that they were spoiled or made much of in any way ; it was enough that they were there, and that there were seven of them. Some people, indeed, said

it was more than enough; but the Worsleys, being philosophical, did not dwell upon this view of the matter.

‘You really are an angel, Jack—sometimes!’ said his sisters that afternoon, when he proposed to ‘take the whole blessed pack’ up the field for an hour, and thus relieve them for a little while.

‘We shall be able to read some Ruskin for once,’ they said to each other. ‘You’ll only have to see, Jack, that they don’t get into the ditch or the pond, or go too near the cow, or touch anything on the rubbish-heap, or dance on the wire-fence—and they mustn’t get through the fence——’

‘Oh, I know, bless you!’ said the boy impatiently, going off to collect the children, and leaving his sisters to enjoy the ‘Seven Lamps of Architecture’ and ‘Modern Painters.’

‘I’ve the greatest mind to get out my story and write a little,’ said Ella presently. ‘You don’t think it wrong, Janet, do you?’

‘Well, the only reason I don’t do it is that I want it to pay,’ replied Janet. ‘I want to make that my vocation eventually, and so it’s a sort of working for one’s bread. Otherwise, I should do it with joy.’

‘Ah! well, I won’t then,’ said Ella, resuming her book.

The girls were each writing a novel.

‘Literature,’ said they, ‘is our vocation. Cooking, scrubbing, teaching, gardening, nursing, cattle-tending, hen-wifing, and so forth, are our avocations. But we will keep the great aim in view, and not let our refined tastes go all rusty and mouldy if we can help it.’

‘I don’t think they are likely to do that,’

Ella said, 'because you see, it is all born in us ; we were never specially taught to care for these things, or taught anything much in fact. We've just—just come so.'

'I don't know,' sighed Janet. 'When you're tired out, you don't care a hang for the most exquisitely refined thing in existence ; and we are nearly always tired out now. I can quite imagine giving it all up and becoming nothing but a drudge. Besides,' she added, 'I don't care half so much for outward refinements as you do.'

Ella glanced at her neat lace frills, her rings and bangles, the little pretty trifles on her silver watch-chain, and from these to Janet's plain old cuffs, strong, unadorned hands, and common steel guard, and smiled rather sadly to feel that there was a difference, and that no doubt Janet—though she could not sympathize with

her indifference to these things—was on the better side.

The afternoon came to an end all too soon.

‘Sunday is over,’ said Ella, with a long sigh, as the front-door was heard to burst open, and several pairs of feet—muddy, no doubt—clattered along the bare floor of the hall.

‘Don’t come in here!’ cried Ella, opening the drawing-room door and seeing lumps of mud in all directions. ‘Go back and rub your boots. Oh, Jack! how *could* you let them come in so dirty! Oh, it is *too* disheartening!’

Jack glared at her and at the children, and flung out of the house again without a word. He felt hurt at this termination to his self-sacrificing afternoon, and thought Ella awfully unkind and ridiculously fussy.

‘I must go to the fowls,’ said Janet, tucking up her skirts and tying on a large apron; and she went out with half a pail of barley.

Ella swept up the mud, got the children out of their hats and coats, set them on chairs with orders not to move, and proceeded to get their tea ready. Jack came in, and took the milk-can and went away again. Mrs. Worsley came down looking ill, silently suffering agonies of neuralgia; while Lottie, fretful over a new tooth, tugged at her hair and cried.

And so the work and the worry went on again.





CHAPTER VI.

‘Oh ! this life
Is nobler than attending for a check,
Richer than doing nothing for a bauble,
Prouder than rustling in unpaid-for silk ;
Such gain the cap of him that makes them fine,
Yet keeps his book uncrossed : no life to ours.’

Cymbeline.

AFTER Sunday comes Monday.
It sounds almost like a proverb,
or a platitude, or something of
that kind. Anyhow, it is a fact which few
of us will be inclined to dispute—a fact of
which the girls were made painfully aware
by the ruthless whirring ring and clatter of
the alarum next morning—hideous sound !

‘Jack, you must clean out the little copper before breakfast,’ said Janet, when she had succeeded in waking him. ‘It’s washing-day.’

The back-kitchen after breakfast presented a cheerful scene. Wash-tubs were scarce in the house, so every bath on the premises had been brought down, and Jack, in his shirt-sleeves, his catskin cap well on the nape of his neck, his trousers hitched up with string, and a great clasp-knife slung round his neck, was pumping as if the very existence of the family depended on his sole exertions, and making a most frightful noise. Water splashed and trickled in all directions on the uneven brick floor; the girls clattered in and out in pattens, feeling, as they said to one another, ‘very like the real thing,’ under the influence of the steam, the smell of soap, and the noise

of pattens and pumping. They had disencumbered themselves of some of their attire, and wore short petticoats, loose jackets, and large aprons ; their sleeves were pinned up to their shoulders, and their faces glowed with a generous enthusiasm.

‘ We shall know the things are clean, at any rate,’ they said to each other.

‘ The copper’s getting jolly hot,’ said Jack with some pride, as he mopped his crimson face ; ‘ I advise you to put pounds of soda in.’

‘ We don’t want your advice, thank you,’ said Ella ; ‘ we know quite well how it has all got to be done.’

‘ Yes,’ added Janet. ‘ Suppose you go and get on with the weeding.’

‘ And have an eye to the children while you are about it,’ said Ella.

‘ Oh ! bother the weeds and the brats !’

said Jack, lingering to adjust the copper fire with his boot; 'I've got something else to do.'

'Then go and do it,' said both his sisters promptly. 'You're in the way now, Jack.'

'Oh, of course! Jack's always in the way unless he's slaving himself to death!' and he flung out into the yard.

'I've got Lottie to sleep at last,' said Mrs. Worsley, coming in and beginning to roll up her sleeves. 'Where are the children? Stella might be practising.'

'Here is Sid,' said Ella, as Sidney appeared from the kitchen with a slate.

'Please, will you set me a sum?'

'Yes; and go and find Stella, and tell her she is to practise; and leave the door open so that we can hear the mistakes. What is Nora doing?'

'Nora and Madge have got to drag Gog

round the garden in my cart,' replied Sidney.

'Got to? What do you mean?'

'Gog said they were to, and he's lying on his back in the cart with his eyes shut and his legs hanging out over the back.'

'What a savage he is!' commented the girls, laughing. 'And where's Muriel?'

Muriel came between Godfrey and Lottie.

'Oh! they've put her into one of the seakale pots with the lid on, to keep her quiet, she's so cantankerous,' said the boy; and Mrs. Worsley went off up the garden like an arrow, foreboding suffocation.

Sidney withdrew with his slate, and presently the thumping of scales on the piano told that Stella had been found and set to work.

'I'll wash up the breakfast-things,' said

Mrs. Worsley ; ‘and has anyone thought about dinner ?’

‘Cold mutton,’ said Ella, ‘and boiled rice.’

‘Ah ! but the master ?’ objected Mrs. Worsley ; ‘he is sure to look in here on his way to town. If I had only known he was not coming on Saturday, I needn’t have sat up all night, and we needn’t have cooked that fowl.’

‘Well, the fowl is a thing of the past, unhappily,’ said the girls. ‘What a nuisance this eating is ! If it wasn’t for men, the whole world might live on cold mutton and red herrings.’

The wife went away to reconnoitre the meagre larder, and devise some new disguise for the mutton.

‘Aren’t your knuckles getting sore ?’ asked Ella presently, shaking the soapy foam off her hands and looking at the

reddened joints where she had rubbed the skin nearly off.

‘Yes,’ said Janet pluckily, without looking at hers. ‘I suppose we shan’t feel it after a time or two. If only I could persuade myself that the things were coming any cleaner!’

‘Perhaps they’ll improve in the boiling,’ suggested Ella.

‘Let’s leave them to soak a bit while we go and make the beds,’ said Janet. ‘Why not set some of them to boil?’ As she spoke she turned to take the lid off the copper, when a shadow in the doorway made them both look up.

‘Roland!’ they both cried, letting everything go, and running to embrace a tall young fellow who stood smiling in the doorway; but they both thought of their wet soapy arms and fell back.

‘ You never said you were coming ; did you leave Oxford this morning ? why didn’t you write, Roland ? the master will be annoyed ! ’—thus the sisters both together.

‘ Oh ! h’m ! never thought of it ; only made up my mind this morning. I thought I’d just drop in and see what you were all about. Can you give me a bed ? ’

‘ Do you mind a brat or two in the room, and Jack ? ’ asked Janet anxiously.

‘ Oh no ! I can kick ’em out if they make themselves a nuisance,’ replied Roland, in the most accommodating way in the world.

‘ Well, it’s *their* room, you know,’ said Ella.

‘ Pray don’t apologize,’ said Roland lightly ; ‘ and what are you up to here with all this mess ? ’ he inquired, looking round.

‘ We do the washing at home now,’ said the girls gaily.

Roland whistled ; stood about in the pools on the floor ; glanced at their curious attire, their pretty hair ; noticed their awkward way of handling the things ; and began to feel dull.

‘ Look at my poor hands, Roland,’ said Ella plaintively, showing him the little red places on her knuckles.

‘ Raw, by Jove ! You can’t do it the proper way, I should say,’ was his comment.

‘ Do you think we ought to boil them first ?’ asked Janet, to whom Roland, their eldest brother, was an authority on every matter, worldly or unworldly, except fowls.

‘ Try,’ said her brother boldly ; ‘ it’ll save no end of trouble, won’t it ? You may depend upon it washerwomen don’t rub their hands raw and put themselves into such a frantic perspiration with so little

result. There must be an easier way. Stick 'em in the copper.'

'It seems too easy to be the right way,' said Ella doubtfully.

'Oh ! pooh !' laughed young Worsley, taking the lid off the copper. 'What a slavish, woman's sentiment ! Here, shove 'em in !'

'Come on, Ella,' said Janet, with implicit confidence—'those pinafores, and all those little shirts and things.'

'We want something to stir it with,' said Roland, as the things went in.

'I'll get you something,' said Jack, who was looking in at the window, and presently in he came with a long scarlet-runner stick.

'Give it here !' said Roland, authoritatively. He always used this tone to Jack.

'It's muddy ; I'll just pump on it a bit,'

said Jack obligingly, holding it under the pump.

‘Look sharp, young un ! that’ll do ; hand it here !’ and therewith Roland plunged it into the copper and stirred the things round vigorously.

‘It’s just like the Christmas pudding,’ observed the girls, standing behind him and looking on.

‘It isn’t nearly full,’ said Worsley, getting quite enthusiastic over it. ‘What more have you got ?’

‘Here are the towels and the kitchen-cloths—*they’ll* take a deal of boiling—and the table-napkins——’

‘Shove ’em all in,’ said Roland confidently ; ‘the water’s getting jolly grey already—it’ll do ’em a deal of good. What are these ?’ picking up Lottie’s white lamb’s-wool socks. ‘They’re white—will be all

the better for a boil—in they go! Now I think we may leave it and recruit ourselves,’ he remarked, shutting the lid with infinite satisfaction. ‘The more you boil at once, you know, the greater the saving of time and fuel. You look after the fire, Jack!’

‘Blowed if I do!’ muttered Jack resentfully. ‘Have you put any soda in?’ he asked the girls.

‘Oh no! we forgot. You do it, Jack—there’s a dear! and a good lot of soap too;’ and away they went, while Jack ‘doctored the things,’ as he called it, with quantities of soda and soap.

‘Come round the garden, Roland,’ said his sisters, one on each side of him. ‘The master will be here directly; he’s awfully vexed about the state of the garden—there’s *such* a lot to be done, and we none of us

know which way to turn, and feel guilty whatever we do.'

Roland suffered himself to be led round the garden, and the girls pointed out to him great tracts of weeds which were all to be cleared away by next Saturday, when 'the master,' as they all called their father, was expected to return and call them all to account.

'We never shall get it done,' said Ella, half-laughing, half-groaning; 'especially now that there's the washing to be done; and really, you know, Janet, we ought to scrub the bedrooms this week.'

'Why don't you set Jack to do this?' asked Roland, as they all stood looking at some half-dozen square yards of chickweed and dog-mercury, which the girls said was an onion-bed. 'It oughtn't to take more than half an hour,' said the young scholar in an off-hand way.

‘ Oh! oh! Just you try it!’ cried Janet. You must hand-weed it, you know.’

‘ The deuce ! Well—what else is there ?’

‘ Well, there’s the east border ; come and see,’ said Janet. ‘ Look at it. What should you think this was meant for ?’

‘ I see the ubiquitous dog-mercury, docks, nettles, and groundsel,’ replied Roland, failing to detect any signs of cultivation.

‘ This is our main crop of potatoes, and the master says we shan’t have one if these are not all cleared away at once.’

‘ H’m! I can quite believe him,’ uttered Roland, not, apparently, much drawn to the potato-plot as a field of labour ; ‘ and what else is there ?’

‘ Oh ! Will *you* help ?’ asked the girls delighted, and instantly discarding the thought of weeding for so grand and admirable a being as their adored brother—

the brother for whose sake it chiefly was that so many retrenchments were made. 'Why, there's always the grass to mow, and the edges to trim; it has not been done this spring yet.'

'All right,' said Roland; 'first I must change my things;' and he disappeared into the house to get out his flannels.

'How jolly that he has come!' said Janet to Ella as they went back to the scullery.

'Yes; let's make haste and get this wretched washing done,' said Ella, 'and get out to the garden, where we can see him. How jolly he looks in his flannels! Hallo!' she exclaimed, fishing up a mass of grey, dripping clothes on the end of the stick out of the copper. 'Don't these things look rather odd? Don't they seem rather dark in colour to you, Janet?'

‘Oh, the blueing and rinsing will set all that to rights,’ replied Janet confidently.

‘Ah! yes; and of course we must bleach them properly on the grass—I don’t suppose Mrs. Manners ever did such a thing.’

‘Of course not. She’d be rather astonished to see what we can do,’ said Janet, rinsing the things with energy.

‘We ought to put them through several goes of water,’ observed Ella, ‘and the more blue you use, the whiter they come, I believe.’

‘Oh! Then we’ll put lots of blue. I dare say these washerwomen spare the blue just to save a few halfpence each time. Penny-wise, pound-foolish! Isn’t it a lovely colour?’

‘Celestial! Help me out now with this basket. Isn’t it just like real? We’ll hang the things on the hedge in the field, and

put some on the grass to bleach. I expect this'll be a grand success, and *such* a saving !'

And they trudged out merrily with a great basket of wet things to hang out.

'Don't these flannel jerseys of the master's look a trifle queer?' asked Janet, holding up one of them.

'Queer? Yes, they do rather ; but they'll come all right, you know, when they're dry.'

When they returned to the scene of their labours they found Mrs. Worsley fishing in the copper with consternation depicted on her face.

'What's the matter?' they asked with sinking hearts.

'Why, you surely haven't boiled all the children's flannels?' said Mrs. Worsley. 'Look at Lottie's socks—you can't get so

much as a finger into them—they're all ruined—quite ruined!

She looked at the little shrunk socks in her hand, not liking to cast reproachful eyes on the two remorseful girls.

'Can't we stretch them?' said Ella eagerly. 'Let's try. Will all the flannel things be spoilt, then?'

'What! Have you boiled them all?' asked Mrs. Worsley, her face lengthening visibly.

'A good many,' said Ella.

'*Not* any of the master's, I *hope*?'

'His jerseys.'

'Heavens! His lamb's-wool jerseys? We're lost! What can we do?—we can't tell him. We must buy some more amongst us. How *could* you boil them!—didn't you know that wool always shrinks? Oh dear! oh dear! Well——' with a deep sigh of resignation,

‘it’s no use crying over spilt milk ; let us wash the rest.’

‘I must lay the cloth, I suppose,’ said Ella, ‘and get the creatures ready. I haven’t a notion where they are. The practising stopped long ago, and Sidney never brought his sum.’

The others sighed audibly, and rubbed away in silence ; and Ella went off to lay the dinner.

Presently she came back with an anxious face. ‘I say, there won’t be enough dinner, I’m afraid, will there ? Roland eats as much as all of us put together.’

‘Of course he does,’ said Janet with pride. ‘So he ought.’

‘Yes, yes ; but how shall we manage ? Couldn’t we girls eat bread and cheese ? We can say we don’t care for meat. He doesn’t notice things, you know.’

‘And I shan’t want any!’ said Mrs. Worsley; ‘so I dare say there will be enough.’

Ella disappeared again, and presently there was a trampling and a stamping in the hall and on the stairs, and a sound of children’s voices.

Then a rather fierce manly voice above the rest: ‘What are all these hats doing here? Who brought in all this mud and littered the whole place with daisies and dandelions? Come down and clear it up?’

Thereupon followed a sound of children in heavy boots coming down again.

‘Who brought this in? You, Nora? Then clear it away instantly. Whose hat is this? Yours, Sidney? You’re fined a penny. Godfrey, this is yours; you’re fined a penny. Stella, yours; you’re fined a penny!’

Dead silence amongst the children, except the trampling of their boots.

‘I’m sure they’ve been told a hundred times,’ whispered their mother to Janet as they held their breath in the adjacent kitchen. ‘He’s annoyed at Roland’s having come over.’

‘Poor Roland!’ muttered Janet. ‘So likely that he would read in his holidays!’

‘Who has been playing with earth and flower-pots on the front doorstep?’ proceeded Mr. Worsley.

Silence amongst the criminals.

‘Oh! all of you then, I suppose,’ he said in blood-curdling tones.

‘I didn’t! I didn’t!’ came from one and another.

‘Well, I shall punish you all if you don’t tell me. I am going up to wash my hands, and you can tell me when you have found

out. No dinner till the guilty one has cleared it all away;' and with that he went up to his room, and the children all began to cry.

'I shall never be able to ask him about going to the Draycotes,' whispered Ella, as they gathered in the kitchen. 'All the children are in disgrace, and Jack hasn't come in. Something has gone wrong.'

'Roland's coming has put him out,' said his wife. 'I know what he thinks—that it is hard we should all work so to try and keep Roland at College, and then that Roland should run over here—which doesn't cost nothing—instead of reading in all his spare time.'

Janet looked angry. 'Let's take in the dinner,' said she shortly; and the next minute she rang the dinner-bell, and Mr. Worsley came down.

‘No dinner till it’s cleared away!’ he said; and the elders went in to dinner in silence.

They looked at Jack’s empty place and at one another with inquiring eyes, but nobody said anything, and all the children stood crying in the passage outside.

‘Stop that noise!’ shouted Worsley, much exasperated. But the crying only became louder, and he, incensed at their insubordination, threw down the carving knife and fork and strode out of the room.

Then was heard a scuffling, a trampling, a banging of various doors, and the crying was subdued by intervening walls.

‘What has happened to Jack?’ whispered the girls hurriedly. ‘He’s in some scrape, or the master would have been angry at his not being in his place.’

‘The governor set him——’ began Roland in his big young voice.

‘Oh, sh—sh!’ cried the girls in agitated whispers; ‘here he comes! Don’t argue with him, Roland, whatever you do.’

‘Deuce!’ muttered Roland angrily, looking round with a queer feeling of baffled pride and indignation at being cooped up with three servile women in this tiny, bare, dilapidated dining-room, where the faded, stained paper only adhered in patches to the walls, showing great holes in the lath and plaster; where the canvas and paper dangled in ragged corners from the ceiling, and the floor was full of chinks and holes, and where, nevertheless, reigned the one influence which had power to make him feel a child still, in spite of his twenty years.

As it was Monday, the tablecloth was still fairly clean, and the plate tolerably bright; but the dull twice-cooked mutton,

the great bowl of not very good potatoes, and the large jug of cold water and loaf of bread in the middle of the table, were all of a piece with the rest of the surroundings. Mrs. Worsley and Janet were in the same *déshabille* in which they had been washing the clothes ; Ella had on an old, shabby, but still neat gown with which Roland had been familiar for years ; she was going to accompany the master to the station.

There was nothing in all this to overawe the young Oxonian ; it was simply Mr. Worsley himself. He had that in his bearing, his face, voice, look, that made everybody afraid of him. The girls used to laugh, and say he had the evil eye ; it was an eye that the most hardy and the most innocent could not meet without a certain quailing ; quick, fierce, piercing, under dark brows that met in a perpetual frown. Not,

of course, that his face was always severe ; on the contrary, no one had a keener sense of humour, a readier eye for the ludicrous, a heartier laugh ; no one could be tenderer when once the tender chord was struck.

Roland, however, knew absolutely nothing of this last side of his nature ; the fun he appreciated, and admired as much as anybody his gifts of head and hand ; but he writhed under that sarcastic tongue, and feared that searching, unsparing eye.

He said ‘Deuce!’ therefore, under his breath, and was conscious of feeling young and small.

In the middle of dinner Jack came in, looking very sulky, and sat down in silence, having probably just finished some task that ought to have been done a week ago.

In the pause before pudding Worsley went out to look up the other culprits, and

by this time his method had succeeded; public opinion had been too much even for the audacious Goggie, and he now confessed that the flower-pot and mud-pie were his affair, was ordered dry bread for dinner, and the rest came in, better late than never.





CHAPTER VII.

‘God said to man and woman, “By thy sweat,
And by thy travail, thou shalt conquer earth :”
Not, by thy ease or pleasure :—and no good
Or glory of this life but comes by pain.’

The Disciples.

ALL the way to the station Ella’s mind was full of the invitation to the Draycotes’, and how to frame her request to be allowed to accept it, while she gave but a part of her attention to her father’s talk about the garden, the hay-crop, the poultry ; about Roland’s misdemeanours, Jack’s enormities, and her own and Janet’s shortcomings.

She thought of a score of different ways of opening the subject, but as soon as there came a suitable pause she grew hot and cold by turns, her heart died within her and she let it slip. And yet she was bent on going if she could, for she and Janet had often looked their future in the face and canvassed their chances of any better sort of life than that they led at present, and had decided that in the Draycotes alone lay their hope of any such opportunities, their sole chance of a glimpse into society and the great world; of meeting their fellow-creatures, and among them perhaps—perhaps that one kindred spirit for which each restless heart was seeking.

As they began to descend the last hill towards the station Ella grew desperate, for she was determined not to take the

easier but somewhat cowardly course of writing to her father after he was gone.

‘I’ve had a letter from Lady Draycote,’ she said abruptly, without so much as a little cough by way of a preamble, ‘asking me to go up for a week or ten days next week. May I go, papa?’

She felt that his impulse was to say no; he was silent, but he made a vigorous slash or two at the brambles by the wayside, and looked thoughtful and a little annoyed.

‘I shall not want any clothes,’ she ventured to say presently, as the whistle of an engine in the station reminded her of the shortness of the precious time.

‘If you did, that would simply put it out of the question at once,’ said her father.

‘And I can pay the journey out of my

pocket-money,' she went on, 'if you'll give me something for the servants.'

'The servants are better off than any of us. Who is to escort you?'

'Can't I go alone?' asked Ella; 'I've done it often.'

'I know you have, but I don't like it; I don't like it at all.'

'Very well,' she uttered in a low voice, half choked with vexation.

'Very well! What do you mean by that?' asked Worsley.

Ella conquered her rising tears, and contrived to say with dry composure:

'I suppose I can't go, then?'

'I didn't say that,' said her father; 'on the contrary, I should like you to go if we can manage it; but you know—or perhaps you don't know—the state of our finances?'

‘But this will only cost a few shillings,’ observed Ella as dispassionately as she could, for she was too proud to try persuasion.

‘There’s Twigg and Butter asking for eighty pounds,’ Worsley went on leisurely. ‘There’s the butcher’s bill upwards of fifty, although we keep that intolerable quantity of poultry : it seems to me they do nothing but destroy the garden. Then there’s Roland—his scholarship contributes a mere drop in the ocean towards paying his bills. Those bookcases are not paid for ; the manure for the hot-bed is not paid for ; the last half-year’s groceries are not paid for. I really don’t know, upon my word, where the money is to come from ! I slave at the rate of some sixteen hours a day for my family, and I can’t see that any one of you appreciates it, or lends a hand to keep

things together a little, or makes any attempt to keep down the expenses. Everything is done in the same reckless way; bills run up here, there, and everywhere, as if money were to be had for the asking; the garden allowed to go to rack and ruin; Jack's education utterly neglected; while you girls write fiction and expect to go off to London at a moment's notice to stay with your swell relations, just at the very time when every day, every hour indeed, is of incalculable consequence in the garden.'

'*Hang* the garden!' thought Ella, sensible of the mingled justice and injustice of these remarks, and of course equally annoyed by both; but aloud she said, 'Then I'd better write and decline, I suppose?'

Worsley did not answer immediately, and they went up the steps into the station-

yard, and passed through the booking-office on to the platform.

Here they walked up and down, waiting for the train—Ella in a fever of anxiety and impatience; Worsley calm and collected, and apparently only bent on enforcing upon her a due sense of their extreme poverty, of the shameful extravagance, carelessness, and idleness of herself and all the rest, in order to show her what ample grounds he had for refusing her request; perhaps also to enhance his magnanimity in granting it, but of this Ella did not feel at all sure.

She thought she could have taken with a good grace a scolding, pure and simple, for her own very patent shortcomings; or the flat refusal of her request. But this being hauled over the coals for the sins of the whole family, many of them fictitious ones, and the suspense as to the final issue was

almost more than her temper would bear amiably.

She saw the train coming round the curve from Brackenbury, and knew she had but two minutes now, but she pretended not to mind.

The next minute they stood at the open door of a third-class carriage, and she collared Hardigras and held him while people took their seats, as he always showed a strong desire to follow his master.

Poor Ella was ready to cry with disappointment, and was thankful to the shady hat which concealed her tell-tale face.

The bell rang, and the doors began to bang one after another; the guard approached with his flag, and some one cried, 'Take your seats, please !'

'Well, I suppose I must say yes,' said Worsley with a kind and rather melancholy

smile, as they parted. 'I like you to meet your relations, and I don't want to seem hard upon you. Good-bye !'

Ella stood holding Hardigras and watched the train out of sight under the bridge, and then set off homeward, only half happy at this very tardy success.

Her way lay across a wild undulating stretch of heath covered with gorse beginning to blossom, and knee-deep in heather. Beyond this was a wood, guarded by the usual announcement about the rigorous prosecution of trespassers, but which was used daily as a short-cut by all the foot-passengers between Eastcott and Windon, or Brackenbury. Just now, however, one was liable to meet a keeper because the pheasants were breeding ; so Ella passed her handkerchief through Hardigras's collar (not without a thought on having to wash

that handkerchief eventually), and led him along—led him, at least, when he did not lead her, for he was nearly as big as a donkey and had quite as strong a will of his own ; moreover he took extra advantage always of Ella, because he knew she was half afraid of him.

They dragged each other in a fitful way safely across the heath, and entered the wood. Here difficulties began to thicken. Hardigras thought it would be pleasant to hunt squirrels and pheasants ; Ella wished him to walk sedately beside her along the grassy road through the middle of the wood. Every now and then he stood still and looked about him wistfully ; and then Ella stood still too, giving a feeble pull at his collar to make him come on, but much afraid he might object. Then he would walk on reluctantly, pulling at his collar and regard-

ing her from time to time with an expression in his yellow eyes that she could not interpret, but which she felt sure meant no good. Then he would perceive a squirrel or some other miserable creature moving somewhere, and plunge forward, dragging Ella with him at a reluctant trot, her arm aching with the effort to hold him in.

‘I declare I’ll never take you out again, Hardigras!’ she exclaimed, standing still at last with the great creature beside her, looking up with those strange sulky yellow eyes of his. ‘You are enough to madden a saint, much more a poor coward like me. Come on now, quietly, Hardigras!’ but he did not respond to her hesitating hand on his collar, evidently expecting her to give way if only he persisted long enough.

Standing there waiting the dog’s pleasure, Ella became aware of steps behind her. It

was against her principles to look round, but her cheeks grew hot at being seen by anybody, were it but a workman, in this ignominious situation. She longed to pretend that it was of her own free choice that she stood thus by the wayside, doing nothing ; she looked down to see if there were not a little flower—a botanical specimen—in which she might appropriately be interested ; but there was none.

When the steps had passed her she looked up to see what kind of person it was who had witnessed her incapacity, and met the inquiring eyes of a young—a rather young man ; eyes which seemed to have expected her to look up, and to say that they had seen her before, for he lingered, and a hesitating trace of a smile flickered round his mouth.

Ella glanced nervously at him, and away

again at the ground at his feet ; a vague idea that she had seen him before began to gain ground in her mind. Meanwhile Hardigras, diverted from his former intentions, whatever they were, by this new object of interest, made a spring forward, which Ella involuntarily followed.

Emboldened by her advance, the young man lifted his hat and smiled, while Ella, flushed and at a loss, smiled too, and then stammered out :

‘It’s the dog—I—I beg your pardon—I d—don’t think I know you.’

‘Scarcely,’ replied he, in a reassuring voice ; ‘but we have met before, Miss Worsley.’

‘Oh! yes, in the woods at Sunley,’ murmured Ella, recognising the voice at once. ‘I shouldn’t have known you if you had not spoken.’

‘Perhaps I had no business to speak,’ said he apologetically ; ‘but I fancied the dog was one too many for you, and when I saw who it was—I—I——’

He scarcely seemed to see his way out of the sentence he had begun.

Ella was much embarrassed, however, for she was oppressed by the feeling that it was very improper to be speaking to a stranger here all alone ; and yet she did not see how to avoid him now that he was there and that they were both going the same way. She made one feeble attempt to let him go, however, saying abruptly :

‘I can get him through the wood, I think, thank you ; and he wouldn’t mind you, I’m afraid. Thank you very much.’

‘But we are going the same way, are we not?’ he asked simply. ‘Will you not allow me to walk with you as far as the

gate up there ? I can at least defend you from the casual keeper.'

Ella was much perturbed. Her sole experience of society and its ways had been drawn from half a dozen dull dinner-parties; and the precepts of the good maiden ladies under whom she had been at school, combined with her father's strictures on girls who flirted and chaffed, and were on easy terms with the young men of their acquaintance, rendered her stiff and shy to a most painful degree with any man under forty whom she did not know to be married.

'Oh!—h'm!—thank you,' uttered she confusedly; 'it's not very far—please don't trouble.'

'Trouble! What next?' he exclaimed, laughing. 'Are you afraid of me?'

There was something protecting and re-

assuring in his tone ; something that made her feel like a child all at once.

She laughed, and her cheeks grew hotter.

‘Rather,’ she admitted desperately; ‘at least—not of you ; only—only, isn’t it—isn’t it not quite proper?’

‘Ah!’

He seemed suddenly to have thought of something far away from these present things—something sad, for his face clouded. Meanwhile, they were walking on up the hill under the pines and the budding beeches.

‘Oh ! don’t be afraid, Miss Worsley,’ he said, after a minute. ‘At any rate, it is not worse than your walking alone.’

‘Hardigras, you know!’ Ella said laconically, patting his big head as she spoke.

‘His protection seems of a doubtful kind,’ observed her companion.

‘Well, I generally come home by the road when I’m alone with him,’ said Ella ; ‘only this is so much shorter that I thought I’d risk it.’

‘Didn’t I see you at Eastcott Station ? You must have walked very fast.’

‘I have to go Hardigras’s pace,’ she explained, laughing. ‘We are all good walkers, though.’

‘But aren’t you very tired? I am sure you are. Let me lead him—he pulls your arm unmercifully. Give me the handkerchief.’

‘No, it will be more tiring for you, because you will have to stoop,’ said Ella, who had not yet learned to accept civility with a good grace, being so used to serve, so utterly unused to be served.

‘But I don’t mind stooping or being tired,’ he replied, taking it out of her hand ;

‘I insist. Have you much farther to go?’ he inquired presently, when they came in sight of the gate at the top of the hill.

‘Only about half a mile down the hill—Windon way,’ she answered.

‘Oh! Then you belong, I suppose, to Windon Church?’ he suggested.

‘Well, we do really,’ said Ella; ‘but we never go there, it is so awfully low. We go to Hawbourne generally; sometimes to Eastcott.

‘Have you a seat at Eastcott?’ he asked rather quickly.

‘Oh no; we sit in the free seats. We are very poor, you know.’

‘And do you think that a misfortune?’ he asked.

‘A misfortune? No. I believe it is the best thing for us; I believe we owe all the good that is in us to our poverty. It makes

us work and do things for ourselves. We are much nearer the heart of things ; I can't quite explain—closer, face to face with life—we have fewer delusions, I mean, and fewer prejudices, and fewer shams. We know nobody, and live in a world of our own—a real world, full to overflowing with interests, and cares, and duties of every kind—not a lazy round of fashionable emptiness, and small talk, and wasted gifts.'

He laughed at this summary description of the rest of the world.

'And you have no delusions and no prejudices ?' he remarked rather satirically. 'Are you content with your life and your poverty?'

Ella looked up quickly.

'Oh ! no, no ; frightfully discontented. I only said I believed it was good for us.

But I don't like it, except in theory. Our theory is, that we all stand back to back and shoulder to shoulder against the whole world, and hold our own by love, and unity, and self-sacrifice.'

'I like your theory,' said he ; 'but why *against* the world ?'

'I mean all that in the world against which we all fight ; all things that come against us from without—hardships—Oh ! I put it so lamely.'

'I understand,' interrupted he ; 'and what is the difference between your theory and your practice ?'

Ella coloured and glanced round for words ; then she looked at him with a shy deprecating smile.

'Our shoulders ache sometimes,' she said, 'and that spoils the perfectness of it—it darkens it all.'

He was silent ; all this was something new to him.

‘ Sometimes,’ Ella went on presently, ‘ Janet and I get so sick of it that we say we will just abandon everything, and aspire to nothing at all beyond the work of the moment.’

‘ Abandon everything ?’ he repeated interrogatively.

‘ I mean all our nice pursuits—our music, drawing, reading, carving — and — and writing.’

‘ Then what is the work of the moment,’ he asked, ‘ if not any of those things ?’

‘ Oh !’ murmured Ella, in some confusion, ‘ we—we have a good many things to do.’

‘ Am I too curious ?’ asked he, smiling.

‘ Oh ! I don’t mind telling any sensible person,’ said Ella ; ‘ but “ the world ” looks askance at us and pities us, and condescends

to be affable when it can't help meeting us, but avoids us if it can. We have no servant, and mamma and Janet and I do it all—house, children, garden and all ; Jack helps too, and does the cow and the pigs, and so on.'

'What — everything ?' uttered he. bewildered, although he had no very accurate conception of what it involved.

'Yes,' answered Ella, 'and sometimes we are quite happy and enthusiastic over it ; and at other times everything goes wrong, and we feel there's nothing we wouldn't do to get away ; though of course,' she added, 'we don't, in point of fact, do anything but stay where we are and work on.'

'I know, I know,' he said sympathetically. 'Life is much the same under whatever circumstances ; the same plan and pattern on different scales. Suffering of some kind

forms the inevitable groundwork—don't you think so ?'

'It is the same in other things,' said Ella. 'We set the highest value on those things for which we have paid pain or sorrow as part of the price.'

By this time they had reached the gate ; he opened it for her, and they both passed out into the road.

'I'll take him now,' said Ella, laying her hand on Hardigras's collar. 'Thank you very much.'

'I think there is a great deal more that we could say, Miss Worsley, isn't there ?' said he. 'I hope you will not want to cut me the next time we meet. Good-bye.'

'Good-bye,' said Ella, thinking about shaking hands and wondering what was the proper thing to do. 'Safer not,' she said to herself, and drew off with a little stiff bow.

‘Who can he be?’ she said, talking to herself as she went down the hill; ‘I’m very glad he didn’t come on and see the house—to-day of all days. Ten to one dinner isn’t cleared away yet.’

Sure enough, when she got in, there was the dining-room just as she had left it; the kitchen fire out; the kitchen littered with dinner-things; saucepans in the fender; cloths hanging on odd chairs, or fallen on the floor; two or three pairs of boots waiting to be cleaned; and a great basket of dry clothes of a most remarkable greyness tinged with blue, standing under the dresser. In the pantry were the breakfast-things not yet washed up, and the house was empty and all the doors and windows open.

Ella’s heart sank down like lead at ‘the misery of it,’ as she mentally called it, and she wandered out across the back-yard and

found Janet and Mrs. Worsley hanging out clothes, while Jack was seen coming down the garden with another load of weeds.

‘The kitchen fire’s out,’ she said disconsolately, standing about amongst the daisies and buttercups ; ‘and there’s all the washing-up to be done.’

‘I’ll light it,’ said Janet cheerily. ‘You’ll be more tired than any of us after your six miles walk.’

Ella felt better at once.

‘I’ll change my gown while you do it,’ said she ; and added, laughing, ‘then I shall forget that I’ve been off the place at all.’

I don’t much think she did forget it, though.



CHAPTER VIII.

‘Conclude, conclude he is in love.’

Much Ado About Nothing.

‘**J**ACK, are you sure he’ll be here in time?’

‘I told him you wanted to catch the 12.15,’ replied Jack, with a shrug of his thin, narrow little shoulders; ‘I couldn’t do more;’ and he went on calmly sharpening his knife on the sole of his great boot.

Ella turned and went back into the house, into the kitchen where Janet was peeling potatoes and three of the children sat on chairs against the wall, in disgrace for

leaving the paddock-gate open and letting out all the fowls.

‘It seems too brutal to go off and leave you all at work,’ she said, standing by the table in her neat, faded frock, and watching Janet rather wistfully.

‘Oh ! never mind,’ said the philosophical Janet ; ‘we take our share in turn. And if they press you to stay, mind you do. A week more or less can make very little difference to us, after all.’

— ‘How pretty you look in that veil !’ remarked Sidney from his chair.

‘Yes,’ said Nora. ‘Are you going to be married, Ella ?’

Ella laughed, and looked at Janet, who turned sternly round upon the culprits and reduced them with one awful glance to blushing and embarrassed silence.

‘Think of me to-night at about eight or

so, Janet, all in white, with pearls, and flowers in my hair,' said Ella ; 'as if there was no such thing as washing-up or boot-blackening?'

'I hope you have taken your songs,' said Janet.

'I hear wheels !' exclaimed Ella, running out into the passage. 'There's the fly ! Good-bye, Janet !'

'Please I want to kiss you !' cried Nora. 'And I do !' cried Sidney ; and Stella echoed, 'And please may I?'

Ella rushed round and kissed them all. 'Say good-bye to mamma for me,' said she, as she ran out.

'The luggage is up,' said Jack, holding out his grimy hand. 'Good-bye. Don't come back in a hurry!'

'All right !' said Ella to the flyman ; and the other children ran up to the far corner

of the garden to cheer as she drove past.

‘My lady is off!’ said Jack to Janet, as they went back together into the kitchen. ‘You’d think she’d never set eyes on a dishcloth, or touched a broom with a pair of tongs.’

‘That I should think she never had,’ observed Janet.

‘Well, you know ’t I mean,’ said Jack aggressively. ‘You really are so precious sharp!’

‘She always looks nice,’ sighed Janet; ‘I shouldn’t wonder if she never came back to us at all.’

‘H’m! Well, she turns up her nose at all the people,’ said Jack, who had often been the silent and totally disregarded witness of his sisters’ private conversations. ‘He’ll be a pretty remarkable specimen that

takes my lady's fancy. Oh !' here he began to mimic Ella's manner and voice, ' " I *couldn't* marry a man whose manners were not aristocratic—blue blood running down his noble brow—or who was stout, or had red hair, or who didn't ride and shoot, and read his Bible, and write novels——" '

' Jack, what an ass you are !'

' Well, poetry then, or essays—ah ! yes ; —a scholarly man he must be—ahem ! I am so very clever and refined myself, I really couldn't *live* with a man whose hair didn't curl, or who wore checked trousers—and fancy if his name were Richard !—or James !'—he shuddered theatrically.

' Shut up, Jack, you idiot !' said Janet, with a smile of contempt. ' That's not the least like her. Don't waste any more time. You'll have to get the children

ready for dinner, while I feed my new chickens.'

At about four o'clock that afternoon—it was a Wednesday—just as Janet and her stepmother, having cleared up the kitchen and the pantry, were settling down to a few hours' ironing and folding; and Jack, in his shirt-sleeves, was littering down the cow and the pigs; and the children were making mud-pies, and playing with broken flower-pots and old battered meat-cans as usual, Ella was ushered into the spacious and faintly perfumed drawing-room at Draycote House in the most fashionable part of Kensington, and rapturously and enthusiastically embraced by her aunt, Lady Draycote, and three of the 'six plain daughters to whom she has once made allusion in our hearing.

They were not really very plain—some

of them, indeed, were sometimes called handsome—but they were singularly like everybody else, all the ordinary good-natured, properly brought-up, fashionably-dressed nobody-in-particulars that one knows—or doesn't know ; brownish hair, greyish eyes, thinnish figures, dullish complexions, largeish mouths, and possessed of a moderate command of tolerable conversation.

‘Now I am quite sure you are tired, Ella, dear child!’ said Lady Draycote, taking her hand in one of hers, while she laid the other kindly on her shoulder. ‘You shall go up to your room and have a nice little rest before tea!’

Ella began to deprecate all notion of being tired, being really rather rested by her journey than otherwise ; but Lady Draycote was quite sure she knew better, and sent her away with her cousin Maude,

with strict orders, playfully given, not to come down till five.

‘There’s a dinner-party this evening, Ella,’ said Maude, as they went up the wide, thickly-carpeted staircase together. ‘Have you any flowers for your hair?’

‘I brought a few white narcissus,’ said Ella modestly, thinking how worn and old her frock looked beside Maude’s dark-blue silk and velvet; and how insufferable her country-made boots appeared on these luxurious carpets amongst the dainty-buckled shoes of her aunt and cousins.

‘We’ll go to the conservatory after tea and get a little maidenhair for you,’ said Maude.

‘Won’t their own leaves do?’ asked Ella, with a diffidence for which Janet would have scorned her.

‘I never saw them worn,’ replied

Maude. 'Everybody wears maidenhair, you know!'

This 'you know' sounded to Ella like 'of course you don't know,' and she gave way with a smile.

'I suppose I mustn't go down till five,' she said to herself, when Maude was gone. 'I'd better unpack.'

So she unpacked, and then laid out her white embroidered muslin and sea-green ribbons, put her flowers in water, took a fond look at her pearls, and found it was five.

When she first entered the drawing-room it appeared to her to be densely crowded with people whom she had never seen before ; but on a nearer view, and after one or two introductions, she found matters grow simpler and less alarming.

'Mr. Barry!' said Lady Draycote, taking

her hand protectingly—‘ Miss Worsley, my niece. This is your cousin Fred—oh! and Nellie—you have never met Nellie before, have you, dear?’ Then followed several more introductions, and Ella, quite bewildered, made a few distracted little bows, glanced at the strange faces, shook hands rather at random, and finally, having not the slightest notion who they all were, she found herself sitting on a sofa next to a stout elderly lady, who was looking at her benignantly, and saying she was ‘ the image of her dear mother.’

To complicate matters two gentlemen were standing over her with cake and bread and butter, sugar and cream; and in helping herself she observed that the forefinger of her left hand was all rough from sewing, and somewhat discoloured by grate-cleaning and boot-blackening, and vaguely it

flitted through her mind that they probably did not supply pumice-stone to the guests here, nor even 'gents' super sand-tablets,' such as Jack sometimes indulged in.

'I remember your mother when she first married,' the benignant lady went on, 'a mere girl, poor thing—so pretty, and so fragile. She and your father were at Florence—he was studying there, and a very promising artist, though he did quarrel with his best friends, and never did anything like other people. That would go off though, as he grew older.'

('Ah!' thought Ella, 'if she did but know!')

'There was not a cleverer man in Florence. Of course you all draw?' she added, with a smile. 'I remember his wonderful theories about all that you were

to learn. What, now, is your special pursuit?’

Ella blushed, and laughed, and hesitated. In speaking to strangers she always felt that any word she uttered might inadvertently let, as she expressed it, ‘one of the fifty thousand cats out of the family bag,’ for they wished to keep their troubles and struggles as much as possible to themselves. So she guardedly admitted that they were fond of many nice pursuits; and since, happily, well-bred people do not listen too attentively to what you say, it all passed off quite naturally, and her old friend went away with the idea that they were entirely devoted to art, and spent happy lives in all its gentle studies.

‘Let me get you some more tea.’ A fair, stoutish, red-whiskered individual was bending over her with some solicitude,

and she wondered, as he carried off her tea-cup, whether it was 'your cousin Fred' or Mr. Barry.

'If it's Fred,' she thought to herself as he talked rather stiffly, and yet with a little air of interest and goodwill, about the Heathshire air and scenery, about her journey, and about the weather—'if it's Fred, I wonder why he looks so unlike a gentleman; and if it's Mr. Barry, I wonder who Mr. Barry is!'

'Here is Ella making conquests already,' laughed old Lord Draycote, when a few of the people were gone and Ella was trying to sort them a little in her mind, and had discovered that the rest were all part of the large family party. 'Mr. Barry is deeply smitten—never saw him speak to a lady before. You've all lost your chance of the millionaire, girls—that's plain.'

‘Barry’s plain,’ said Fred, laughing—
‘plain but solid, like the speckled donkey
at school. Not a bad fish, though.’

‘Is Mr. Romilly coming to-night, papa?’
said Maude.

‘Yes, he is; and by-the-bye, mamma, I
asked him to bring that musical foreign
friend of his—seems a decent fellow for a
foreigner and a musician,’ Lord Draycote
added slyly. ‘I’m not sure that he isn’t
an artist, too.’

‘Oh, Charles!’ exclaimed Lady Dray-
cote, alarmed. ‘We don’t know anything
about him—he may be anybody. I’ve
heard that some of Mr. Romilly’s friends
are very queer—he was abroad so long,
you know. It never does—you never know
—these young men nowadays, Charles;
and nothing but a musician and an artist—
what will people think?’

Ella tried to follow this argument, and was a little surprised that nobody laughed.

‘We shall never know what they think,’ said her uncle composedly; ‘and Romilly’s a rattling good fellow. Make yourselves very smart, girls; he’s no end of a *parti*—will be at least. By-the-bye, you must know him, Ella; his future property is in your neighbourhood. Sunley is the name, I think.’

‘*I* know him!’ thought Ella, as she denied all knowledge of so much as his name. ‘As if I knew *anybody*! We know the woods,’ she added aloud, ‘but only as outsiders—what we call empty-bottle - and - newspaper - people; we picnic there sometimes.’

‘Well, then, you’ve all a fair and equal chance,’ laughed Lord Draycote. ‘She doesn’t know him, so you can breathe

freely. They say he's not a marrying man ; but many men are not, you know, till the fatal she——'

'Charles ! What nonsense you talk ! Don't mind him, Ella,' said Lady Draycote.

Then the girls showed her their crewel-work, and lace-work, and their painting on china ; and asked about her music, and would she like to go to lectures with them ? Maude and Nellie attended lectures in History and Physiology.

'Or if you like ambulance, you can go with Violet,' they said. 'Vi goes in for the useful. Of course you wouldn't care for cookery ? it's so—well—you have to do things, you know. Lectures are so much nicer.'

Ella felt that her cousins were very clever, and gave them to understand that

she knew nothing, and never did anything, and that her music was a mere farce.

‘How beautifully you draw,’ she said, reluctantly acknowledging to herself that even young ladies of rank and fashion might do some things well, as she examined a china plaque with a group of figures on it.

‘Nellie did that. Isn’t it nice?’ said the others. ‘She could teach you, if you like—she only gave five guineas for the colours and things, and you get several nice patterns with them—you trace it, you know—it is very effective for bazaars and presents, and you needn’t be able to draw.’

‘Tracing patterns—five guineas—bazaars—presents!’ thought Ella to herself, feeling that a gulf yawned between her and these guileless, comfortable dabblers. ‘I’m afraid I shouldn’t have much time at home,’

she said aloud ; and I must admit that a wicked thrill of satisfaction went through her heart to find that the drawing *was* only traced.

Poor Ella ! she liked to delude herself with a theory of universal equality. ‘ They are rich, and they have rank and society, and everything they want,’ she and Janet used to say ; ‘ but they are dull and commonplace, and of course they can’t do half the things that we can.’ Thus they consoled themselves.

It was rather disconcerting to find them attending learned lectures, ‘ doing ambulance,’ as they called it, learning cooking, and drawing and painting all sorts of pretty things ; and, moreover, to find that they were not very plain after all.

‘ The compensation, perhaps, will be in the future,’ said Ella to herself, as she

dressed for dinner and contrasted her cousins' life with her own.

Fred took her in to dinner.

'Make hay while the sun shines,' he whispered to her confidentially as he handed her the *menu* to study.

'I'm not hungry,' she replied innocently, and in fact the prospect of having to sing after dinner made her teeth chatter with nervousness.

'No, no,' laughed Fred, 'of course not; but,' in an almost inaudible voice, 'you've got the great *parti* on your right—Romilly, you know—Nellie is dying of envy.'

'What a dreadful brother to have!' thought Ella, glancing across at Nellie's face, certainly more flushed and more animated than it had been; and then she was just beginning cautiously to survey the great *parti*, when he, too, looked up,

and each recognised the other in a moment.

‘Miss Worsley!’ he exclaimed frankly, delighted. ‘How very funny that we should find ourselves here, side by side, and not know it—how jolly! Are you staying here? So am I. Oh, I am so glad!’ and then, meeting Lord Draycote’s astonished eyes, he said, ‘Miss Worsley and I are old friends—are we not?’

Ella blushed a good deal to find several pairs of eyes directed towards her.

‘Yes,’ she stammered, ‘but I—I didn’t know it was you.’

‘Oh! oh!’ laughed Lord Draycote. ‘Oh, Miss Ella! She told us this afternoon, Romilly, that she had never heard your name; as to knowing you—she scorned the base insinuation. Now I hear you are old friends, and she declares she didn’t

know it was you! A pretty story! Which am I to believe?’

Curiosity and astonishment were visible through all the politeness of her cousins’ glances, and she caught Fred in the act of winking at Nellie.

‘How absurd they all are!’ she thought, with cheeks aflame. ‘They never will understand.’

‘It is a very romantic story, isn’t it, Miss Worsley?’ said Romilly, turning to her with laughing eyes. ‘I think we won’t satisfy public curiosity on the subject; what do you say?’

‘I will leave it entirely to you,’ said Ella shyly, feeling very safe with him.

‘How kind of him not to tell!’ she thought, when the second course created a diversion. ‘I dare say he knew the girls would giggle over it.’

Ella stood in some awe of the opinion of society as she imagined it, and she looked back upon that walk and talk with the unknown young man in the woods as a social enormity which could scarcely be forgiven if once it were known. Indeed, when she imparted the little episode to Janet over the washing-up, her final comment had been, 'Pleasant, but wrong! as the monkey said when he kissed the cat;' and Janet had agreed with her, though neither of them could see anything wrong in it.

'Where did you learn all your pretty German songs?' the girls asked after dinner, as they stood about the piano with their coffee-cups and examined her music.

'I learned in Germany—I was at school, you know——' Ella said, remembering that more than one of the 'fifty thousand cats' in the family bag was connected with the

fact ; for at the age of seventeen she had made the journey alone and third-class, and had taught English to her German school-fellows, and thus paid only half what the others paid—one of the many things that had to be concealed from her aristocratic relations.

The girls set her to sing. They all petted and patronized her a little, and after each song they all called out, ‘How lovely! How delicious! Do sing something more!’ and made such a pleasant noise about her that she did not hear the gentlemen come in.

‘Ah! that is Schubert,’ said a manly voice behind her ; and she looked round and up to see Mr. Romilly standing there, and beside him an elderly man with long grey hair and a little neat dark moustache, and large spectacles over kindly blue eyes.

The elderly man turned to Mr. Romilly and said in German :

‘She has the sweetest voice I have heard for many years ; and feeling, too, which English girls so seldom have. One can hear, of course, that she has not been taught ; but, bah !—there are many voices in which that is the only thing you do hear,’ he laughed, and then asked for another song.

‘You mustn’t speak German if you don’t wish me to understand,’ said Ella, blushing. ‘It is lucky that speech was so very complimentary!’

‘This is my friend Herr Dregert,’ said Romilly, introducing him. ‘His praise is worth having.’

He praised her next song so much, and in such an audible voice, that Ella hastily made her escape, covered with blushes, and

slipped into a chair beside her cousin Nellie.

Nellie was laughing immoderately, though apparently trying to suppress her mirth.

‘Isn’t he a funny, ridiculous old creature?’ she whispered to Ella. ‘I did pity you so.’

This was a new view of the matter to Ella, for until this moment she had felt a good deal flattered; but she immediately felt there might be truth in it, and resolved not to be an object of pity or ridicule again if she could help it.

Meanwhile, Herr Dregert was playing one of Chopin’s beautiful melodies, and the buzz of talk died away as the soul-compelling music spread its spell through the room.

Ella sat motionless, with her hand over her eyes, not so much listening as lost and

absorbed in the music, till her lips quivered and the foolish tears ran down. Oh for a fan to hide her face ! and how, oh ! how was she to get at her handkerchief, on which, poor victim of fashion, she was sitting, without standing up and being found out?

‘Of course he’s a professional,’ said Nellie, when the music ceased, ‘so there’s nothing wonderful in it. I don’t think I care for that sort of playing in a drawing-room. It is rather overpowering—don’t you think so?’

‘Perhaps it is,’ mumbled Ella, with bent head, making a dive for the occult handkerchief, and feeling, as she told Janet afterwards, ‘such a fool sitting there with nasty tears dribbling all down her cheeks, and pretending she wasn’t crying.’

She began to have an instinctive shrink-

ing from Nellie, and was relieved when her cousin was fetched away to sing, and Violet came and sat down beside her.

Violet was about as far beyond twenty-nine as a young unmarried lady might be. She had had her romance, recovered from her disappointment, and now had leisure to take a kindly and somewhat motherly interest in her younger and happier contemporaries.

‘You look tired, dear Ella,’ she said, noticing the girl’s pale face. ‘Shall I tell you a compliment I heard paid you just now?’

‘Well,’ said Ella, laughing a little, ‘perhaps you’d better. Only, when Janet hears anything complimentary about me, I always make her keep it till some time when I’m awfully dull and miserable, and then it encourages me to go on, you know.’

‘I don’t think you are often miserable,’ said Violet, ‘you have such a bright face. Mr. Romilly and Herr Dregert were talking about you.’

‘Oh! ought you to repeat it?’ interrupted Ella ingenuously.

Violet laughed.

‘Keep it for one of your rainy days,’ she said. ‘Herr Dregert said you were like an Italian Madonna, and that your hair was the perfect colour.’

‘Oh!—oh, don’t!’ murmured Ella, blushing.

‘And then,’ pursued Violet, amused, ‘Mr. Romilly said, “Yes; it was Titian’s colour, and he thought it very beautiful.” Aren’t you very proud of it now? I admire it too, though the others don’t,’ Violet went on; and added with unconscious humour, ‘but I dare say they will when they hear

Mr. Romilly's opinion. What colour do you call it ?'

'Red, of course,' replied Ella promptly, though she cherished a secret suspicion that it was auburn, never having been able to ascertain what colour that might be, and having observed in several novels that the heroine in the ugly-duckling stage has red hair, which, when she dawns upon society as a beauty, turns out to be auburn. She half thought Violet might enlighten her now on the subject ; but she did not.

'Mr. Romilly is staying till Wednesday,' said Violet, 'and Mr. Barry is coming to-morrow, too.'

'Is that the millionaire?' asked Ella.

'Papa calls him the millionaire,' replied Violet, smiling. 'He is a stockbroker, and very rich. He got Fred out of one or two bad scrapes at Oxford last year—that was

how we came to know him. He is rather what people call a rough diamond ; but he has a great many nice friends, and nice tastes and things.'

'Oh !' said Ella, wondering, since Violet apologized for him in this delicate way, whether any of her cousins was destined for the millionaire.

'Here come your admirers !' said Violet, looking mischievous, and Romilly and his friend came up and begged for another song.





CHAPTER IX.

‘Lo here the worldè’s bliss ! lo here the end !
To which all men do aim, rich to be made !
Such grace now to be happy is before thee laid.’

SPENSER.

‘**W**HAT do you do on Sunday after-
noons ?’ Ella asked her cousins
at luncheon the next Sunday.

‘Oh ! I’ll tell you,’ said Fred ; ‘we
smoke, and wish for to-morrow.’

‘I didn’t mean you,’ said Ella, as loftily
as if he had been Jack, ‘I meant your
sisters and the grown-up people.’

‘Oh ! the females. They meditate in

their bedrooms till tea-time,' Fred responded, unabashed.

'Then, if there's no objection,' Ella said, 'I shall write in the garden this afternoon.'

After luncheon, people hung about the fireplaces in the various rooms, chatting, fiddling, lolling, idly turning the pages of Sunday books and magazines, making jokes that would not have passed muster on any other day, and laughing in a subdued and discreet fashion.

Ella very soon slipped away, collected her writing materials, betook herself to the silence and seclusion of the arbour in the garden—a wooden shed with a feeble pretence of greenery straggling about it, much disguised with soot—and sat down to write to Janet.

Far and near bells were ringing for afternoon service, the noise of the streets was

hushed, crowds of grimy sparrows chirped and twittered and quarrelled on the wall amongst the rosy almond-blossom, and tumbled fighting down upon the meagre grass plot between the gravel walks. Everything was quiet in the house, standing there so stately and so well ordered, with trim blinds and curtains, and backs of looking-glasses in all the upper windows ; and high above, the white clouds travelled through the blue sky in the sunshine.

‘Even in London,’ wrote Ella, taking promptly a dip of ink, ‘you can tell without a calendar that it is Sunday and that the spring has come—there is that same nameless something in the air that we always notice at home. Aunt Alicia and the girls are all resting—Sunday seems to tire them a good deal. They should try a little of our method. The gentlemen—Heaven may or

may not know where they are ; and I have the garden and the tortoise—tethered by a string and a hole drilled in its shell to a scrubby medlar—all to myself. I suppose people who have gardens in London are too grand to walk in them.'

Luckless boast ! Before the ink was dry, voices and tobacco simultaneously invaded her retreat, and she descried several manly forms patrolling the far end of the garden.

'I judged them prematurely, it seems,' she went on, after muttering 'Bother !' to herself, 'but they'll hardly like to come to this arbour——' a shadow fell across the floor, and there stood Mr. Romilly with a cigar between his fingers.

'Oh,' said Ella, reddening and sweeping her papers together, 'is this the smoking-room ?'

'I know you don't mean that for a snub,

Miss Worsley,' answered Romilly, with a smile. 'It's only a place where you can't write in peace—somebody is sure to come bothering—talking—poisoning the air with smoke, and wasting the precious time.'

Ella felt that her face must have betrayed her. 'You are snubbing me now,' she said, laughing. 'I like the smoke, and I'd rather talk to you than write my letter—it's only to Janet ; it doesn't matter.'

'May I sit here, then ?' Romilly asked. 'Janet is your pretty sister, isn't she ? The one that keeps Jack in order and has such very good use of her head and her hands ? "Gaby" she called him,' Romilly mused aloud. 'I nearly broke down then, and upset the spirit-lamp,' he went on, laughing—'it was so funny to hear her—only I didn't dare. How strange that we should have met that day in the wood, and then

find ourselves here under the same roof, isn't it ?'

'Very,' said Ella, 'but it is stranger, don't you think, that after these few days we both shall go back into the world whence we came, and shall never, perhaps, meet again. It is one of the things in life that puzzle me. Why meet at all ? It is like a novel with a great many superfluous characters and meaningless incidents, isn't it ?'

'What, life you mean ? Yes, if you look at it merely from a novelist's point of view. But don't you think two people may be not wholly without influence on each other's lives even though they see no more of each other than, for instance, you and I ?'

'I suppose so,' admitted Ella, 'but I feel so impatient for larger things, greater events, stronger friendships, solutions of

some of the many riddles of life, some distinct gain from time. It seems so baffling to go back to my drudgery next week as if nothing had happened, none the better, none the wiser, none the nearer achieving anything worth achievement, only having realized a little more plainly what my ideal is, and that it is hopelessly out of reach.'

'Then it is more likely to be the right sort,' said Romilly encouragingly. 'What do you mean by your ideal? Tell me about it.'

Ella began readily enough. 'First, we want to get something out of life——' and then she paused.

'Money, for instance?' suggested Romilly mischievously, expecting her to fire up indignantly; but she only sighed rather hopelessly.

'Of course we must make money some-

how,' she said simply enough, 'but we want our work to be worth something apart from its money value ; not to be mere money-making. And life—oh ! Mr, Romilly, it is so awfully short, and still I never make up my mind how I will take it, and what make of it. Do you know what I mean ?'

'Quite,' said Romilly, with a sad smile. 'Go on.'

'Oh ! I dare say—at least of course *you* have made your chart long ago,' Ella said, looking up deprecatingly, 'and perhaps you never had any doubt about it. But I don't know what to aim at ; of course if you haven't a definite aim, you just diffuse any power you have over all sorts of insignificant things that produce nothing. And then people come between and baffle you—you can't sit alone and work out your own salvation ; and women are always personal !'

Romilly laughed at the curious abruptness of this last remark, and asked for an explanation.

‘I mean that we worship our ideals personally; we embody them in individuals, and lose ourselves at the outset. And we are almost always self-conscious.’

‘Miss Worsley,’ said Romilly, after a long silence, ‘will it console you at all for the time you have wasted in London to know that I owe to that walk in the woods with you a certain moral impetus which has changed the whole course of my life?’

‘Oh!’ murmured Ella, her eyes suddenly filling with tears. ‘Then it is only because you do not know me as I am.’

‘That’s as it may be,’ said he; ‘however it came about, I owe it to you, and I thank you and the—the chance that brought me across your path, from the bottom of my

soul. I cannot tell you my story,' he went on, shading his face with his hand, 'it is not edifying. But when I say that my own wrongdoing has completely blasted and ruined my life, you must believe it, and believe besides that I have not been man enough to own it before the world.'

'It is difficult to believe ill of you,' Ella said, very low.

'Then,' said he, looking up with a faint smile as he used her own words, "'it is only because you do not know me as I am.'"

Then perhaps he saw the tears brimming in her eyes, and thought he was making her unhappy about things which should never have troubled her, for he rose rather abruptly and stood looking out at the others a minute; then he turned to her and said, half laughing :

'I didn't mean to make you sad—I

thought you would like, perhaps, to know it—these ill-winds that waste your time blow good to people you come across without your being conscious of it.’

‘Oh! Please don’t laugh at me about wasting time,’ Ella said. ‘Janet and I always talk in that high-flown strain. I’m afraid you must think us very conceited and silly. We don’t mean it altogether.’

‘I wasn’t laughing at you at all,’ said he. ‘But I won’t keep you any longer from your letter. May I be remembered to your sister and to Jack—Bernard, I suppose, I ought to call him?’

‘They will be pleased,’ said Ella; and he lingered a little wistfully in the doorway, and then sauntered away across the grass.

Lady Draycote’s meditations, assisted by Violet, took a very practical turn that Sunday afternoon.

‘ They are admirably suited to each other, Violet,’ she remarked from the comfortable sofa, where she lay among shawls and cushions, in a lovely crimson peignoir, with a volume of sermons in her hand.

‘ Yes,’ said Violet, who was ensconced in a large armchair, with her feet on the fender, and a Japanese fan between her face and the fire. ‘ Each has what the other lacks. He has money, and a good position among moneyed people ; and she has the birth and refinement and social tact that he is rather wanting in.’

‘ She would really be a very good *partie* for him!’ Lady Draycote went on. ‘ He wants, as your father says, “licking into shape ;” a good wife who is socially a cut above him would be the making of him. The more I think of it, the more I like it, Violet. I feel, too, that we ought to do

something for him after what he did for Fred.'

'And you really believe he is smitten?' Violet asked.

'My dear! He never takes his eyes off her—he who never looks at a woman. He doesn't talk to her, but that is because he has nothing to say to ladies. You can see how he listens when she speaks, and how struck he is by the curious straightforward things she says. And then, my dear, see him when she sings—you'd think it was an angel at the piano!'

'I am rather surprised, mamma,' said Violet thoughtfully, 'that Mr. Barry should have singled out such a girl. She *is* very pretty and attractive, but so unconventional—you'd have thought he would be more commonplace in his tastes.'

Lady Draycote was silent a minute, and

then she laughed a dry little laugh. ‘Mr. Barry is a shrewd man of business. Lewis Romilly was telling me yesterday that there is not a single thing in his house that is not good of its kind and valuable. As for Ella—at the Gathorne’s, on Friday night, the Duchess came up to me and said, “*Do* tell me, my dear Lady Draycote, who is that *lovely* girl?” and everybody was admiring her.’

‘Do you call her lovely, mamma?’

‘Ah! well—one could find fault of course,’ said Lady Draycote. ‘But you notice her in a moment among a crowd of girls—that beautiful mass of bright, crisp hair; that fair skin; those dark, expressive eyes! And then, she looks so happy—that is a great charm. I do think Mr. Barry will be a lucky man if he succeeds.’

‘I should think he is sure to succeed, mamma,’ said Violet. ‘They must be miserably poor at home. Have you noticed Ella’s hands?’

‘I thought them very well-bred-looking. Why?’

‘Why, we girls were telling fortunes last night, and studying the lines on our hands; and Nellie—you know how very thoughtless she is sometimes—Nellie said, “Oh, Ella! what a funny colour your hands are on the inside! What makes the palm so different from the back?” and poor Ella coloured and said in her curious way, “They’re meant more for use than ornament. I’ve got a good deal of work out of them in my time.” And do you know, mamma, there were little scars of blisters worn all along the palm. She told me afterwards it was from gardening. Fancy what they must

have to do ! I am sure, by her manner, that that was not all.'

'Oh ! I haven't patience when I think of them. Cecil Worsley never was like any other human being !' Lady Draycote exclaimed, settling herself for a regular talk on this—one of the standing themes of wonder, annoyance, and irritation in the family, and one which remained after every discussion just as much of an enigma as it had been before. 'When he came here three-and-twenty years ago,' she went on, 'and wanted to marry poor Rachel, your father wouldn't hear of it. But there was always a little bitterness and constraint between him and the young half-brothers and sisters ; Rachel fretted, and the others said he was cruel, and he gave in. Poor Rachel ! How she idolized him ! After all, he was as handsome as could be ;

very dark ; and he was full of talent and cleverness of every kind — eccentric, of course ; but one thought it would wear off. Ah ! and then the babies came one after another, and she died before she was six-and-twenty.'

' But if he is so wonderfully clever,' said Violet, ' how is it that they are so poor ? That is what I cannot understand.'

' Nobody understands it,' Lady Draycote said impatiently ; ' only if you knew him you would not wonder at anything. I don't profess to understand art, but people say he is, or might be if he chose, a first-rate painter. But his theories are quite too grand for this world ; he won't attempt to please anybody ; looks down upon all mankind, and the more likely they are to be able to help him, the greater is his contempt for them. He has quarrelled with the Royal

Academy and with all his brother artists ; he won't—so they say at least—he won't sell his pictures for anything less than the exorbitant prices he puts upon them, nor part with them to anybody who, he thinks, cannot thoroughly appreciate them. Of course he never sells a thing.'

'A sort of genius !' remarked Violet, with a little half-compassionate, half-contemptuous laugh.

'And he only paints when he feels inspired,' pursued Lady Draycote. 'Such ridiculous affectation ! As if his wife and children would wait for his inspiration before they die of want. He spends years over one picture, and then says it would be sacrilege to part with it. That's how he goes on.'

'How dreadful, mamma !'

'Your father declares that when he dies

he will leave the contents of his studio to the nation, and expect the nation, in mere gratitude, to provide for his destitute family.'

'I wish all the more that we could get Ella well married,' said Violet, with a sigh.

'I'm quite determined she shall marry Richard Barry,' answered her mother confidently; 'they will have seen enough of their father's high-flown style to be practical themselves. I don't think she is likely to hesitate. I shall give her a little hint or two, and of course she must not go home on Wednesday.'

'I think she wants to,' said Violet, who had a little more of Ella's confidence than the rest. 'She said Janet was very easily knocked up, and would be ill if she didn't go back.'

'Oh! I think I shall be able to get over

that,' said Lady Draycote, smiling airily, and not the least realizing the difficulties in her way. 'I shall put it seriously before her.'

'Wouldn't it be a pity to say too much?' suggested Violet.

'I shall manage it beautifully,' said her mother; 'and now, my dear, I think I will just take forty winks before tea.'

Violet rose. 'You have just an hour,' she said, as she left the room.

'Now, Ella, my dear child,' said her aunt the next day, when she had contrived to have her alone and felt safe from interruption, 'this is all nonsense about your wanting to run away on Wednesday. Why, we have seen nothing of you. I quite hoped you would stay a month.'

'Oh!' said Ella, and thought to herself, then why didn't you mention it before?'

‘So now you are going to stay a nice long time,’ said her aunt comfortably, ‘like a good child.’

‘It is very kind of you, Aunt Alicia,’ said Ella, in an unpromising tone, ‘but you know there is a good deal to do at home, and they can ill spare a hand, especially as I am the strongest of them all. It isn’t fair.’

‘Oh ! but they can easily spare you another week,’ urged her aunt. ‘They can get a woman in to help the servants if there is really so much to do.’

Ella laughed at this large and general idea of the *ménage* at The Roses. ‘We can’t afford any extra expense,’ she said, refraining from any imprudent revelations about servants. ‘Of course, if I thought they would have to get anyone in, that would only be an additional reason for hurrying back.’

Lady Draycote sat silent a while, looking distressed.

‘I really think, please, that I ought to go,’ Ella ventured to say. ‘Indeed, I would really rather go on Wednesday.’

‘Now, Ella, I am going to speak to you very seriously,’ said her aunt, smiling a little, however, to take off the edge of her gravity in case Ella should be alarmed or annoyed; ‘really, very seriously. You are not a child any longer, you know——’

‘But my first duty is to papa,’ interrupted Ella stoutly.

‘Quite right, dear, *quite* right—that isn’t what I meant—of course, dear; and I shouldn’t wish ever to interfere,’ she said hastily, ‘but there is the future to consider—that is what I want to talk to you about.’

‘Ah! the future!’ sighed Ella; ‘of course that isn’t my affair.’

Lady Draycote paid no attention, but the argument of 'duty' had commended itself to her as a useful weapon.

'Don't you think it is your duty to your father and to Janet, and indeed to all those poor young children, to take advantage of opportunities of seeing people, and making nice acquaintances ?'

'H'm—what's the good ?' asked Ella rather gloomily; and then Lady Draycote smiled with great significance.

'I mustn't betray any confidences, must I?' she said archly; 'but you know you are much too pretty to be shut up and hidden away down there where you have no society. Think, my dear child, what it would be to Janet now, if you were to make a good marriage! Think of the advantage to all your family !'

'Yes, of course,' said Ella innocently,

‘but I can’t hang about idling and leaving them all to work extra hard, while I wait for some one to come around and propose. “To be left till called for ;” I haven’t the time, you see, Aunt Alicia. One ought to be able to sink capital in a venture of that sort, and I haven’t got it. I quite agree with you that it would be very nice if I had.’

Lady Draycote almost suspected sarcasm in this grave speech, but Ella had evidently no such intention.

‘But you don’t know, dear child,’ she said, rather baffled ; and then went on with sudden tenderness, ‘Ella dear, you have no mother ; you must let me be a mother to you ;’ she went over to Ella, who was sitting on a sofa opposite, and gave her a kiss ; ‘you must take my word for some things that you don’t understand.’

Ella felt embarrassed, as she always did when people were demonstrative of their affection ; it 'made her feel a fool,' as she expressed it ; so she merely said 'Yes,' in a dubious and provisional sort of way.

'I dare say you don't know how lovely you are,' Lady Draycote went on, sitting beside her, and taking her hand in one of hers, while she caressingly stroked her curly hair with the other. 'People have admired you very much since you have been here, and I have been quite proud of my niece.'

Ella blushed and smiled with pleasure at this very new idea. What would Jack and Janet say when she told them ? Of course, though, they wouldn't believe it.

'And I know somebody who admires you very much indeed,' her aunt went on ;

‘somebody who wants a wife, Ella, and who is not easily pleased.’

‘Then I’m afraid *I* shan’t please him,’ laughed Ella.

‘Dear child, I am serious,’ said Lady Draycote, with slight reproof in her voice and eyes. ‘I have thought about it a great deal, and I think it is a great chance of happiness which you ought not to throw away. He must be twelve or fifteen years older than you are—a very good age. He is exceedingly well off—one should not be worldly of course, and I have a horror of marrying for money,’ Lady Draycote went on virtuously, ‘but that is no reason people should not look at things as they are. Always look at the common sense of a thing, I say. He has nice tastes; he is fond of music—especially your music, I have observed; collects beautiful things—

enamels, china, pictures, lace, and so on; and then he is steady—that is everything, absolutely *everything*.’

‘When the rest is thrown in as it were,’ said Ella carelessly, longing to laugh, but not quite daring. ‘I suppose you mean he doesn’t drink?’

‘My dear child, thank Heaven that you don’t know all it means! Such men are rare nowadays, and marrying men are rare.’

Lady Draycote spoke with some emotion, and Ella felt penitent. It occurred to her that she must have seen the man, since he had seen her; spoken to him, no doubt, in blissful ignorance of his designs upon her happiness.

‘Oh, Aunt Alicia!’ she murmured, as the thought took shape in her mind, and the shy colour dyed her cheek and brow. ‘Won’t you tell me who it is?’

Aunt Alicia laughed and kissed her.

‘That would never do,’ she said; ‘but I think it will be very foolish of you to run away from him.’

Ella’s face fell. She had quite forgotten about the going home.

‘May I leave it open till to-morrow?’ she said at last. ‘The letters from home may make a difference.’

‘Yes, dear; do leave it. There is no hurry,’ said her aunt kindly; ‘and I am sure now that you will not do anything rash or foolish, will you? My heart is quite set on this, and I am sure you are too sensible to look only at the outward appearance. A little roughness and want of polish is nothing compared with steadiness of character, and a good, clever wife may do a great deal for her husband if she takes the trouble.’

Ella listened, and wondered, and looked submissive.

‘And now,’ said her aunt, ‘I am going to take you for a little drive in the park, and Mr. Barry is coming with us, so run away and put on your hat, dear; the carriage will be round directly.’

Ella ran to her room, turned the key, and fell on her knees beside the bed, her blushing face hidden in her hands, her heart going up in glad thanksgiving for the happiness that was coming to her. It only seemed too good and too wonderful to be true. She laughed and sang as she dressed for the drive, and came down looking radiant.

‘First I must go to one or two shops,’ Lady Draycote said, as they rolled away in great state from the door; and Ella was thinking how delicious it was to drive in a

large barouche with a pair of fine horses, and an imposing footman jumping up and down on the slightest symptom of anyone's wanting anything—so much jollier than an omnibus, she thought, glancing into one as they passed it, and fancying herself one of those dowdy, weary-looking women inside it, crushed between 'stout parties,' and handing coppers between the conductor and the passengers, and being stared at by the man like a foreign Count in the corner—how well she knew it all !

'I shall not take you in here, dear,' her aunt said, as they drew up in a long line of sumptuous carriages which were waiting before a fashionable milliner's. 'It is hardly worth while. I shall not be a minute.'

So Ella was left sitting opposite Mr. Barry, who fixed his brown eyes upon her with a pleased and benignant air.

Ella, with the keenest interest, was looking for heroes and heroines among the passing faces, and reading imaginary characters in them as they strolled or hurried by.

‘This is rather dull for you,’ observed Barry.

‘Oh no!’ Ella exclaimed; ‘I could sit here for hours watching the people. I was just hoping Aunt Alicia’s minute might prove half an hour.’

‘You don’t care for the shops, then?’ he asked, trying to find a topic that would keep her talking.

Ella laughed.

‘I dare say I should like them well enough if I had plenty of money and no better way of spending it,’ she said, her eyes still travelling hither and thither with the faces in the crowd.

‘But you like London?’ he suggested.

‘Oh, very much!’ was her enthusiastic reply. ‘I used to think it so ugly, and the misery of the streets used to depress me——’

‘Oh!’ interposed Barry. ‘You mustn’t think too much about that—it is a waste of pity. The beggars, and cripples, and match-women are mostly a rascally lot——’

‘That’s why I pity them so,’ interrupted Ella simply; ‘but I have come to the conclusion that we others are just as unhappy in other ways, and in proportion to our light and our opportunities just as rascally.’

Mr. Barry thought this very amusing. and laughed a good deal.

‘I didn’t mean it for a joke,’ said Ella, glancing at him half annoyed, and there flashed through her mind the thought, ‘Mr.

Romilly would have known what I meant, and he wouldn't have guffawed like that.'

'I hope you don't consider all your friends as rascally as that old blind humbug at the corner there,' Barry said banteringly, indicating a placarded beggar with a money-box, standing near.

'I don't know whether he is a humbug or not,' Ella said, with some dignity; 'and I said "in proportion to our light and knowledge," or something to that effect. And being only a woman,' she added, with self-contempt, 'I'm afraid my friends are beyond the pale of my judgment.'

'Then I hope you will include me, Miss Worsley, among that happy number,' said Barry, with a smile.

'I hardly know you, Mr. Barry,' Ella answered, in a careless matter-of-fact way, 'and I shouldn't think it could matter

much to you what my judgment might be, supposing I happened to think about it.'

'Oh yes, it would,' said Barry significantly; and added, 'do you know you are rather cutting, Miss Worsley?'

If he expected to elicit a gleam of coquetry, or a blushing smile and toss of the head, or another cutting remark, he must have been disappointed.

'Did I say anything rude?' she exclaimed, colouring distressfully. 'You must not mind me, Mr. Barry, if I say stupid things. I have been so little in society, I am always making mistakes. I am so sorry—I really didn't mean to hurt your feelings.'

She raised her eyes to his face in timid deprecation, with a pleading look that trembled on the verge of tears, and Barry was enchanted. It was the first time she

had really looked him in the face since they had left the house ; he felt inclined to prolong the situation ; she was generally so difficult to talk to, he found ; she did not seem readily to lend herself to that sort of personal banter which was his idea of love-making in the preliminary stage.

‘But you did hurt my feelings, Miss Worsley, very much,’ he said, withholding his pardon till she should yield a little more of that cool, girlish indifference that was so difficult to deal with.

‘*I am* so sorry,’ murmured Ella ; ‘I don’t know what I said. What did I say, Mr. Barry?’

‘I am sure you would not like me to repeat it,’ said he gravely ; ‘but I have not forgotten’ (he had by this time, but that’s a trifle when you’re making love). ‘I shouldn’t have expected it of you.’

‘I assure you I didn’t mean it,’ said Ella, beginning to regain her composure. ‘I am afraid the truth is that I was not paying much attention, so don’t think any more about it, please, whatever it was.’

‘We’ll, I’ve forgotten what it was,’ said Barry composedly, looking her full in the face ; ‘but I couldn’t resist the temptation of prolonging your penitence a little—it was so pretty.’

Ella turned away without speaking.

‘Miss Worsley, have I offended you? Are you angry?’

‘Yes, very!’ said Ella crossly, dimly conscious that he had taken a liberty, but feeling helpless to avenge herself.

‘Oh! don’t be angry,’ said he easily ; ‘I couldn’t bear it.’

‘Please don’t be silly, Mr. Barry—
Oh! what beautiful lilies of the valley!

How lovely! I wonder where they get them?’

Barry found himself forgotten and deserted, and saw Ella, who had hastily alighted, talking to a gaunt, hollow-eyed girl, with an emaciated baby huddled in a drab shawl on one arm, and a basket of lilies on the other. He had no notion, however, of being left in the lurch in this way, and promptly followed her. He heard her asking all sorts of questions about the baby, and saw her lift its tiny claw-like hand, while the lovely eyes she raised to the mother’s face were full of painful tears. The mother answered her questions with a dull sort of apathy, and didn’t seem to think there was much the matter with the child. Ella bought some of the flowers, and turned away to find Mr. Barry standing beside her, admiring and amused.

‘I shall give her something for your sake,’ he said; ‘I know you’d like me to.’

‘Of course I should,’ said Ella, blushing; ‘I can give so little myself.’ And with that she returned to the carriage.

‘Buying flowers, you extravagant people?’ asked Lady Draycote, smiling on them as she came back at last.

‘May I give them to you, Aunt Alicia?’ said Ella, as they drove on; ‘they are so sweet.’

‘My dear child, are they really for me? That is too good and nice of you!’ exclaimed her aunt, smelling them rapturously, not without a diplomatically interested glance at the other bunch.

‘And, Miss Worsley, will you accept mine,’ said Barry, presenting them with a curious little air of gallantry, ‘as a slight token of my humble penitence?’

‘Oh!’ murmured Ella (the Worsleys all said ‘Oh!’), ‘Oh! thank you.’ And she accepted them with a sort of cold, shy restraint, and let them lie on her lap, while she kept her eyes below the level of Mr. Barry’s, and felt nervous, she knew not why.

At the next shop they stopped at, Ella volunteered to accompany her aunt, and left her admirer to amuse himself as best he might. But Lady Draycote found opportunity to whisper:

‘I think, dear, you had better remain in the carriage next time. It seems a little rude to poor Mr. Barry, does it not?’

‘I am sure he would rather be left to his own reflections than be bothered by a dull person like me,’ said Ella, with confident simplicity; ‘I don’t know what to say to him.’

‘Oh! nonsense, you foolish child!’

So Ella sat still next time and tried to talk.

‘People call London ugly,’ said she; ‘but I think, in its way, it is as beautiful as anything that artists paint.’

Barry looked more flattered than anything else at this remark.

‘I think so too,’ said he. ‘There are a great many fine buildings in London.’

‘I am not much of a judge of fine buildings,’ said Ella; ‘I was thinking more of the picturesqueness and poetry of views one gets every now and then. On a stormy afternoon I have seen the sky a mass of broken smoky-grey clouds, with pools of orange and crimson light, high up between the dark houses on either side of the street; and the people and their traffic looking so little in the dimness and the mud down below. I dare say you have often seen it?’

‘I avoid the streets in that kind of weather,’ said Barry; ‘but now that you have told me that, I shall go out sometimes and look for “picturesque effects.”’

‘Then go to one of the Thames bridges, and look up towards the sunset when it looms lurid through the smoke and the mist,’ said Ella, ‘and see the spires and towers and house-tops against the strange light, and the great dark barges and grimy steamers moving slowly down out of the cloud and mystery of the distance ; and you will hear the rattle and the roar of the streets, and the whistling of trains, and the lovely grinding organs——’

Barry broke out laughing at this.

‘Oh! Come, Miss Worsley—you don’t admire the organs — you, who are so musical!’

‘I love them,’ said Ella ardently; ‘they

mean so much to me—I can't explain. I like all the sounds of London ; even to sit at an open widow and hear footsteps passing along the pavement, and the *cling-cling* of bicycle-bells, and little boys laughing.'

'But you should go to the opera,' said Barry, remembering by way of explanation of her odd taste that she probably didn't know any better.

'Ah !' uttered Ella with a long-drawn sigh, 'that *would* be grand !' and there-upon Barry made plans for the distant—the not very distant future.

'We must wear some of our lilies to-night,' said her aunt, as they drew near home ; 'don't you think so, Ella ?'

'Very well,' said Ella obediently.

'She is very shy,' said Lady Draycote to Violet, when they bade each other good-night, 'but that is nothing.'



CHAPTER X.

‘Là mon pauvre cœur est resté.
S’il doit m’en être rapporté
Dieu le conduise !’

ALFRED DE MUSSET.

ON joining the ladies that evening after dinner, Barry made straight for the sofa where Ella, in white, with his lilies in her hair, sat in earnest conversation with Lady Draycote.

‘I shall tell Mr. Barry,’ said her aunt, hiding a little real annoyance with a playful smile, as he came up. ‘Mr. Barry, this naughty child insists on going away on Wednesday, in spite of all I can say. She

thinks they cannot get on without her at home.'

'I can't wonder at that,' said Barry, looking at her with admiration which he was at no pains to conceal, 'but I think they might spare her a little longer.'

'Yes ; of course they ought to—I shall leave you to persuade her, Mr. Barry ;' and Lady Draycote rose and moved away.

Barry promptly sat down in her vacant place, and addressed himself to his task. 'Do stay, Miss Worsley,' said he. 'Won't you, to please me ?'

'It is not a question of pleasure,' Ella answered ; 'it is duty.'

'Oh !' uttered Barry, amused as usual, as though it was really a little too preposterous for such a pretty girl to be talking of duty ; 'I don't think it *can* be that.'

'I don't see how you can possibly know

anything about it, Mr. Barry,' said Ella, thinking, 'He really is too idiotic.'

Poor Barry! It was his fate to annoy her, it seemed; luckily for his peace, however, it did not occur to him to view it in this light. Her blunt answers always surprised and delighted him afresh.

'You gave it me that time,' laughed he, as much pleased as if between them they had said the funniest thing of the season. 'And if it was only a question of pleasure, Miss Worsley, what would you do?'

'Oh! I should stay here,' she answered decidedly.

'Would you? Dare I feel flattered, Miss Worsley?' he asked with a beaming smile.

Ella looked at him in unfeigned wonder, and then suddenly broke into irrepressible laughter. 'Yes, Mr. Barry,' she said, as soon as she could speak, 'I believe you dare.'

‘And what were you laughing at?’ asked he confidentially, feeling he was really getting on at last.

‘I don’t suppose you mean it,’ Ella answered, her mirth brimming over again, ‘but you say such very funny things.’

Barry looked crest-fallen, and uneasily wondered what funny thing he could possibly have said.

‘I think you are very easily amused, then,’ he remarked, with the air of a sulky schoolboy.

‘Yes, I know I am,’ said Ella with a conciliatory smile. ‘The least thing sets me off if it happens to show its comic side.’

Barry didn’t like to think that he had a comic side. He rather despised the comic and the funny as beneath a man of his sense and capacity.

‘But you mustn’t laugh at *me*,’ he said in

a slightly lowered voice, with significant stress upon the final pronoun.

‘Very well; if you will undertake not to be funny, I will promise not to laugh,’ said Ella. ‘But really, Mr. Barry, I think that up to the present you have laughed at nearly everything I have said, and I haven’t complained. Why should you mind?’

‘Because it’s different,’ he replied, and she perceived with the utmost astonishment that he was annoyed. ‘A man may be dull in drawing-room talk among ladies when his life has been spent like mine in work and not in idling, but he may have feelings,’ Barry said, and Ella felt rather than heard an unwonted vibration in his voice, ‘and they may be all the stronger for his not knowing how to express them to please a lady’s ear.’

Ella felt frightened and remorseful. ‘I

am so sorry,' she said, inwardly vowing to steer clear in future of this odd man who passed so unexpectedly from light banter to sulkiness bordering on ferocity, without any apparent determining cause.

'I wish, Mr. Barry, since I always have the misfortune to be rude or unfeeling when I speak to you, that you would go and please the ears of the other ladies who know how to behave.'

There was no mistaking the penitent sincerity of this speech, though indeed he might have been excused for laughing at it.

'I don't care about the other ladies,' he said rather doggedly. 'It is you that I want to please.'

'Oh !' murmured Ella. 'What a pity !'

'And if you go on Wednesday, I shall go on Wednesday. The place will be unbearable without you. I don't care for women.'

‘I hope the rest of the party will contrive to survive our absence,’ laughed Ella, wondering whether there were many men like this ‘in society,’ and what was really the proper way to treat their strange conversation.

Barry rose abruptly and walked away.

‘Old Barry seems very condescending to you, Ella,’ remarked Fred, balancing himself on two or three chairs in her vicinity.

‘Oh ! it’s condescension, is it ?’ said Ella. ‘I wanted to know.’

‘Queer, isn’t he ? But he’s an awfully kind-hearted chap,’ Fred went on. ‘He pulled me out of a bad scrape or two at Oxford—one of my chums is a sort of nephew of his, and Barry does everything for him. No end of a good thing, I fancy, being a stockbroker, you know—takes pretty good brains too. Barry’s cleverer

than you'd think—quite a self-made man and all that sort of thing ; and we know he's done a lot of kind things—helping young fellows—and strong sense of sort of—sort of duty, you know, to his own relations—quite common sort of poor people that nobody knows anything about. We never had him here before—but he's taking a few days' holiday just now, like me and other busy fellows,' said Fred with a grin, 'as it's Easter-time. I fancy a stock-broker is obliged to be pretty much on the spot, you know, generally.'

'In every sense,' laughed Ella, delightfully relieved at this rambling talk that was not, as Mr. Barry's, perpetually introducing a personal element ; 'and Fred—do tell me—will Aunt Alicia really be vexed at my going home on Wednesday ?'

'Oh no ; of course not,' responded Fred

cheerfully. 'Just you do what you like. That's only her agreeable way of putting things. I'm generally precious ready to go back to Oxford after a very few days of this. It is slow, you know. Aren't you going to sing? I like your singing—seems to have some sense about it. Come along—I wish you'd sing that thing that goes waving up and down; or that other jolly thing with the kind of waltz business in the middle—know't I mean?' and they went off to the piano together.

On Wednesday, accordingly, as she and fate would have it, Ella bade her aristocratic relations farewell.

As she was going through the last embraces, Romilly in a greatcoat came in with an apologetic and hurried air. 'Miss Worsley—you're going down to Eastcott by the 3.10, are you not?'

‘Yes,’ said Ella, with a sudden sinking at heart. (‘“More cats in bags, *as usual*!” I said to myself,’ said she to Janet that evening, when she found leisure to recount her adventures.)

‘Then why shouldn’t we share a cab?—I have very little luggage,’ Romilly said; and Ella caught sight of such a scowl on Mr. Barry’s broad face as had nearly put thought and speech to flight, it was so startling. But Romilly was not noticing him, and went on: ‘And then I can be your escort, if you will allow me, to your journey’s end.’

Ella glanced at her aunt and surrounding cousins, and they none of them seemed to be shocked; so concluding it was all right, she accepted his companionship, and he hurried away to have their luggage put up.

‘That is very nice for you, dear,’ said

her aunt, holding her hand as they stood waiting for the return of the footman to say that all was ready ; and Ella felt as if half the things would be forgotten unless she saw to them in person, especially as neither Jack nor Janet was to the fore.

Nellie was giggling a little, and looking as if she saw a good deal in the situation that did not occur to other people.

‘ You must come up and see us again later on,’ Lady Draycote said at parting ; and whispered, ‘ I think you very foolish to run away, but I know somebody who is not so easily discouraged. He will wait.’

The sense of these words did not find its way into Ella’s preoccupied brain till long afterwards ; Romilly handed her into the cab, said ‘ Waterloo—main line,’ to the driver, jumped in after her, and away they rattled. The wonderful visit was over like

a dream, and she felt just about as much the better or the forwarder for it as one does after a dream for having dreamt it.

Ella was much disturbed in mind as they drove along by the fear that Romilly, as she had known other people do, would want to pay the whole fare of the cab. At the station he took charge of the luggage and had it labelled, and then volunteered to get Ella's ticket.

'The gates are not open yet,' he said. 'You'd better stay in the waiting-room, hadn't you?'

'Please, I'd rather get my ticket myself,' faltered Ella, feeling herself grow crimson beneath her veil.

'Why?'

'We are not going together,' she stammered, opening her purse and tendering her share of the cab-fare.

‘That’s the cab,’ said Romilly in pleasant business-like tones, pocketing the money to her great relief ; ‘and I *think* we are going to travel together—I’m going to look after you !’

‘I don’t want—at least—in fact, I’d rather—you don’t know,’ Ella stammered out. ‘Let me get my own, and—and good-bye, Mr. Romilly.’

‘Miss Worsley, I really don’t understand,’ said Romilly ; ‘I’m dull.’

‘Well, I’m going third then,’ groaned Ella desperately ; ‘so you can’t come with me, and you wouldn’t like to get the ticket.’

‘Oh !’ said Romilly, his face clearing ; ‘and is that all ?’

‘Yes,’ said Ella, and away he went to the ticket-office, while she, unable to believe that things could go well without her

personal supervision, mounted guard over the portmanteaus.

When he came back the gates were open, bells were ringing, and imparting a general sense of being left behind to all the people on the platform, who immediately began to run, to assault the harmless porters, to tumble over the lamp-barrows and milk-cans, jump into the wrong carriages, and ask the guard what on earth he meant by it. Ella, of course, set off running with the rest, scanning the luggage-heaps as she went, when Romilly stopped her with a hand on her arm and assured her she might take it quietly, as they had still a good three minutes before the train started.

‘What a thing it is to be a man, and to know the time!’ thought she admiringly, and Romilly next declared that the luggage was perfectly safe.

‘My first conviction when I enter the gate and see the train,’ said Ella, ‘is that unless I can run a mile in considerably less than five minutes, I am done for ; I generally stand by the luggage-van till the last moment, and then run for my life to get into my place, and still all the way along I am tormented by the fear that something has been left behind.’

‘Poor child !’ laughed Romilly. ‘Her we are,’ he added, finding an empty third-class carriage with bare wooden seats and partitions only half-way up.

‘Oh ! thank you very much,’ said Ella, with heart-felt gratitude, clambering up and turning to bid, at least, a temporary good-bye. ‘You will lose your place if you wait any longer.’

‘Won’t you let me in too ?’ he asked, looking up with a shy smile.

‘ You’re not going third ! ’ said Ella incredulously.

‘ Yes, I am, ’ said he. ‘ Why not ? ’ and he jumped in and shut the door.

‘ Oh ! but aren’t you only doing it for—for me ? ’ asked Ella, in pretty confusion.

‘ Of course, ’ he answered ; ‘ it’s all the same to me what class I travel by ; and if you go third, you need an escort all the more. ’

‘ But you aren’t used to it—you must mind it so much more than I do. ’

‘ I don’t know about that, ’ said he, letting down the far window and then unstrapping a plaid for her ; ‘ but I think it more than probable that I shall travel third-class for the rest of my life. I’m going to mend my ways, Miss Worsley, ’ he added cheerfully, sitting down opposite her ; ‘ those, at least, that are not past mending. ’

‘Of course, if you think it right, that is a different thing,’ said Ella simply.

‘You think so,’ said he rather sadly ; ‘but it hasn’t always for me made the difference that it should.’

Ella looked at him a little inquiringly, but shrank from asking any question.

‘I mean that when you think anything the right thing to do, you do it without more debate,’ he said, ‘although, from what I see and know, it often goes sorely against the grain. Now I don’t ; when it goes beyond a certain very moderate limit I fail—that is where you have put me to shame.’

‘I wish you knew Janet, then,’ said Ella ; ‘you would think nothing of me if you did.’

Romilly looked out at the streets above which they were passing, and made no answer.

At each station the carriage took in a fresh batch of travellers, and was soon more than full ; and an exceedingly mixed sample it presented of the British public. There were several poor women ; a smart pair of barmaids ; a genteel person of the dress-maker sort ; and a pale girl in a shabby black dress, who might have been a daily governess ; there were babies, too, and rather sticky-looking little boys without pocket-handkerchiefs ; the rest were mostly working-men, in whitey-brown coats and corduroys, carrying satchels of tools. The prevailing odours at first were peppermint and tobacco ; but later on a man in a jersey, with half a bushel of shrimps, got in, and then the smell of stale fish became predominant. Then a young soldier in a red coat, with his cap well on to one ear, got in ; and finding no room to sit down, he very

obligingly said he would stand, and rocked about on his feet, threatening with every involuntary lurch to pin somebody against the partition in an effort to save himself. Meanwhile, he supported his constitution with shrimps out of the basket at his feet when the man in the blue jersey was looking the other way.

‘I shall be glad when you are out of this,’ said Romilly in an undertone to Ella, somewhat sickened by the *tout ensemble*.

Ella smiled discreetly. ‘I should have been frightened alone,’ she whispered ; ‘but now that I feel quite safe, it is great fun—I like to see them.’

‘Do you think anyone has ordered a fly for you?’ said Romilly, when they stood together on the gravel at Eastcott, and the train was disappearing round the curve beyond them, and a couple of porters hung

about for their tickets and instructions as to luggage.

‘Smart’s cart will fetch my things,’ said Ella to a little old porter who was familiar with the Worsley ways ; ‘I am going to walk,’ she added, turning to Romilly.

‘What ! Three miles after your journey ! Oh ! you oughtn’t to do it,’ said he, as they went out.

Ella only laughed. ‘I always do,’ she said ; ‘and I know your way lies in the opposite direction, as I am going over the heath. So good-bye, and thank you for all the kind things you have done for me.’

‘Miss Worsley, I’m awfully sorry to say good-bye !’ Romilly said frankly, as he heartily grasped the hand she held out to him.

‘So am I,’ returned Ella ; ‘but it must be done, you know.’

‘Yes, it must,’ said he, smiling. ‘And I suppose you would say the sooner the better?’

‘Yes, I suppose so,’ said Ella; and there-with she went her way, turning with a last nod and smile as she ran down the wooden steps into the footpath.

He looked after her for a minute, and then turned away with a sigh to the carriage which was waiting for him in the station-yard.

Ella, toiling up the steep station hill alone, heard the carriage drive off, and then the regular and fast-receding double trot of the horses’ feet till all was silent—how silent after the rattle of London, the bustle of Waterloo, and the whirling roar of the train on the down journey! Her heart sank lower and lower as she went, past the school at the corner, across the high-road,

over the ditch and broken fence on to the heath, and along the soft peaty ruts between the heather-scrub and pushing crooks of bracken, in a stillness that made her very breathing seem a disturbance of some enchanted repose.

‘And it hasn’t found out yet that dogs can’t climb!’ she said angrily to herself, as she passed a high wooden hoarding and a bull-dog on the other side charged furiously against it, and contrived by sheer impetus to fly a few feet up the perpendicular planks, falling back as inevitably as a wave that rushes up the cliff, and barking itself hoarse with impotent passion. She could not suppress a thrill of fear as she heard the violent assault of its body against the fence, the momentary pause, and then the clattering rasp of its claws as it slid down for another spring. It really seemed as if by

some access of rage it might hurl itself clean through, leaving—Ella already saw it with her mind's eye—a clean-cut pattern of a doubled-up bull-dog in the planks. She was accustomed to trust a good deal to average luck, however, and did not quicken her pace very much as she reflected that the dog had been at it now for a good two years, and the chances were all in her favour against its happening to succeed just when she was passing by.

That was the only approach to an incident on the homeward way. When she came through the wood where she had first spoken to Romilly, she lingered, and a faintly smiling dreaminess crept over her face. A pile of felled trunks opposite the great sandpit offered a strong temptation, but she knew that her leisure meant extra work for some one else, and passed on.

‘Is it possible,’ she thought, with downward, dreamy eyes, her thoughts scarcely shaping themselves in words—‘is it possible that only half an hour ago he was with me, taking care of me? and now I walk here alone and know nothing of him, nor he of me; and there is not the slenderest gossamer thread of connection or possible communication between us. Oh, life, life! How strange it is!’

If it scarcely seemed still a reality as she walked through the wood, how was it all thrust away and blotted out when she reached home! Glancing up at the house as she passed down the road to the gate, the first thing her order-loving eye observed was that the blind-cord in her bedroom was broken, and the blind, torn half off its roller, was streaming idly out of window.

‘Well,’ she said to herself, determined to bear up, ‘it won’t take long to mend it, after all.’

A branch of roses had fallen—probably snatched down playfully by some of the children—right across the front-door from the top of the bow-window of the study, and the door-step, which of course no one had had time to wash since she left, was green with damp, and covered with mud and gravel. The door hung open, and all the worn, splintered floor was strewn with gravel and children’s shoes ; a heap of little hats and coats was piled on the slab at the foot of the stairs ; and half-way up the staircase wall she saw, flapping loosely, a great jagged wing of paper and canvas that had parted company with the lath and plaster, and allowed some handfuls of mortar to tumble downstairs which no one had

found time or thought it worth while to sweep up. Ella summoned all her self-command and pushed on to the drawing-room.

‘Don’t shut the door! Don’t shut the door!’ shouted Jack from the greenhouse, into which the windows opened. ‘The handle’s off! Come and see what I’m doing!’ he went on, as Ella crossed the room and looked in to see her special domain a mass of broken flower-pots, heaps of earth and leaf-mould, and all the young tomato plants at the point of death for want of water.

She felt a lump growing in her throat.

‘And what *are* you doing?’ she asked as calmly as she could, not liking to get into a rage the very first day of her return.

‘Oh! I’m having a grand turn out,’ said Jack, with that bustling superiority which

we display when we are putting our neighbours' affairs to rights. 'I find everything wants re-potting.'

'And the tomatoes, I see, are dead,' said Ella, with the apathy of despair.

'The tomatoes? H'm! they *are* in rather a bad way,' Jack began apologetically.

'It is too bad,' Ella murmured, half choking.

'Well!' cried Jack, in a fury, 'you can't expect me to do all your work as well as mine. I've had something better to do.'

'Then why go out of your way to make all this mess?' retorted Ella.

'Oh, *very* well! Everything I do is wrong, of course!' said Jack, with the overdrawn humility which he always put on when the girls were down upon him. 'I'd better leave it for you to do. Of course, I shan't presume to interfere *now*;

and he, with the air of a thorough labouring man, spit on his hands, seized the barrow, and ran it violently at the narrow door, where, being at the best of times a tight fit, it stuck.

Ella turned away, and as she went to the kitchen heard him, with loud interjections, such as 'Plague! Beast! Tarnation! Now *then!*' charging the frail door-posts with the '*idiotic* barrow,' as he was calling it, until he recovered himself enough to wheel it carefully through, and went off, leaving the greenhouse *in statu quo* for anybody to finish up that liked. 'Of course *he* didn't want his head bitten off!'

Ella went into the kitchen.

'Oh, there you are!' said Mrs. Worsley, in a weary, overworked way. 'Sit still, Godfrey! Well—enjoyed yourself?'

'Pretty well,' Ella answered, feeling very

nearly extinguished, as she surveyed the bare kitchen-table, with a loaf, and a pot of dripping, and a jug of milk and water on it, and all the children sitting round with crumby cheeks, and mouths too full for speech—and oh, such dirty pinafores!

‘Make haste, children!’ said their mother; ‘you must all be in bed by half-past six—there’s all the ironing to do.’

‘The beds aren’t made,’ observed Nora, as if she was imparting the most delightful news.

‘Bother the beds! no more they are! I dare say Janet will do them when she comes in.’

‘Where is Janet?’ Ella asked huskily.

‘Doing something with those precious fowls, I suppose,’ was the weary answer; and Ella divined that the fowls had been trespassing again.

‘I’ll do the beds,’ she said, and went out across the yard to look up Janet first.

Janet, in an old brown serge that looked, since Ella had last seen it, ten times as old and brown, and which was unevenly tucked up to keep it more or less out of the mud, and partly protected by a very coarse and dirty apron, was cleaning out one of her fowl-houses.

‘So you’re back again!’ she remarked, looking up with a nod. ‘It’s a pity you didn’t stay on, as they wanted you to.’

‘I don’t know,’ said Ella; ‘there seems already to be arrears of work to last a fortnight. The pleasure is hardly worth the price one pays for it. Besides, I thought you would knock up if I didn’t come back.’

The Worsleys did not waste their graciousness upon each other, and Janet,

going on with her work all the time, merely shrugged her shoulders with an expression which said, 'What would it have mattered?'

'Can you come in and make the beds with me?'

'I want to get this done before dark,' said Janet ; and Ella went away to do it alone, and was weak enough to shed a few furtive tears on Madge's pillow as she shook it up, and an image of Romilly—a glance of his eyes, a tone of his voice—flashed through her memory, and made her feel more bitterly alone.





CHAPTER XL.

‘It is the mind that maketh good or ill,
That maketh wretch or happy, rich or poor.’

SPENSER.

THEN the world uttered its opinions on Cecil Worsley, it was seldom far wrong ; and when it discussed his character and manner of life, and all that he did and left undone, what it said—in the strain of what we have already overheard—was mostly true. Yet to the world he remained a sealed book—rather was it a book they could all read, but which perhaps not one could understand. There was no denying that he was

clever—indeed, he had been one of the bright stars of his University, and after carrying off many laurels in the shape of prizes and scholarships, had crowned his undergraduate's career by winning a First Class, and then, to the disappointment of Dean, Fellows, and Tutors—to say nothing of his family—he cut all connection with the University, declining its proffered honours and emoluments, and declared himself a votary of art. His assured income was exactly a hundred a year, and on this he did not hesitate to marry. All the hesitation was on the part of the elder half-brother of his intended bride ; but this, as we know, was overborne or wearied out by the tears and insinuations of pretty Rachel and her young brothers and sisters, and she was reluctantly suffered to bestow herself and her meagre fortune—some two or three

hundred a year—on the poor, but handsome, gifted, and fascinating young suitor who had already made himself master of her girlish heart.

Diplomatic relations between the families were thus strained at the outset, and never recovered it ; of late years, indeed, the chief connecting link was broken ; Rachel was dead, and Worsley had taken another wife—different in every possible way from the first ; and the mutual jealousy and distrust of the opposite camps was apt to find vent upon the devoted heads of Rachel's children who were taken to task by each party in turn for their participation in, or supposed connivance at, the alleged crimes and enormities of the other.

The boys cared little for all this unprofitable jangling ; but it had a chilling effect upon the girls. Often bewildered by the

strange accusations they heard on either side, it seemed that they had no place to flee unto, and no man cared for their soul. Misgivings crept in even when their hearts most expanded, checking the outcome of their best feelings, and they grew up undemonstrative and somewhat sceptical.

Of late years they had seen less and less of their father, for when the new family of young children began to flourish and abound, he looked about him for a cheap place to keep them all in, and hit, by chance, upon 'the very thing' in Heathshire, within a couple of hours of London. They had not long been installed there before they found that it was in a state of almost hopeless disrepair and dilapidation; but stoicism rose to the occasion, and what could not be cured was patiently endured.

Worsley, after trying the experiment for

a little while, decorating the little drawing-room with the hoarded gleanings of his life in Italy, draping the windows and painting the doors, creating a large garden out of a grassy wilderness, and stocking the field and outhouses with as much live stock as the place would bear, bethought him once more of his painting, had a new attack of inspiration, and went back to London to his studio. He shared this studio, which was in Kensington, with another artist; and there he spent his days, only going down to The Roses now and then to see how things were going, and keep them all up to the mark.

That he never was like any other human being was very fairly true; what his friends—or those, one should rather say, who had once been his friends—found most provoking was, that he was, as they

said, 'such an extraordinary mixture.' There were very few good qualities that he did not possess ; but somehow he turned them to such singularly bad account, that it would have seemed really more satisfactory if he had been without them. Armed, as it were, with the best weapons for the battle of life, he was always siding with fate and fortune against himself. In her most charitable moods Lady Draycote always said she hoped he was mad, 'for the sake of those poor children.'

I don't quite follow her train of reasoning myself, but that is what she said. Many people set Cecil Worsley apart in their minds as a being beyond the pale of ordinary judgment.

'Oh, *Worsley!*' they said, with a shrug and a smile that spoke volumes, and put the question by.

Ella and Janet were tolerably well aware of his peculiarities, because they became in turn the confidantes of their young step-mother, and of their mother's people; besides which, the slow gleanings of years from casually expressed public opinion, combined with their own experience, all tended to confirm them in the conviction that their father was extraordinary. And still, woman-like, they admired and loved him all the more.

People complained that he was cruel to let his wife and daughters slave as they did.

‘Granted,’ they said, ‘that the house and children must be attended to; but why keep up a large garden and a fowl-yard, pigs, and cattle, and dogs, and heaven knows what not, when you don’t keep so much as a boy to do the dirty work?’

Worsley treated this view of his affairs with lofty contempt. Never happy himself unless working at the highest pressure, it did not occur to him to suppose that the three young and not over-strong women who, with the help of Jack, carried on the work of the house, the nursery, the garden, and the farm, did not find the labour alone ample reward.

When Ella and Janet were little things of seven and six, and came to watch their father at whatever he was doing, he used to chafe at seeing anybody idle.

‘I don’t see you working,’ he used to say, and would immediately set them something to do or to learn.

Poor Worsley! The children were a little afraid of him, and thought him cross; how could they tell that their little bright faces recalled to him the face he should see

no more; while the thought of their neglected bringing up brought bitterly home to him all that he had lost and could not supply to them. At these times he would set himself to teach them something, but the quick, scholarly mind and nervous temper could not bend and curb themselves to keep pace and patience with their childish intellects, and the lessons generally broke up in tears on their part, and bitter heart-ache on his.

These casual tasks were all the actual teaching they received till they were in their teens; but the influence of their father's constant companionship had been such that they were then better educated, and infinitely more capable than most girls of their age. When they went to school they were set down as dunces by their companions, because they knew nothing by

book, and could not string off any list of names or grammar rules. But as soon as they had understood what was expected of them, they set to and soon surpassed all the rest. Not that they were singularly clever, but from their early infancy they had been made to use their brains, and as Janet used to say:

‘I don’t believe there are many things we couldn’t do if you’d just give us a notion what you want done.’

It was rather a conceited opinion of their own powers, but perhaps the fault was on the right side, and preferable to that refined helplessness which seems to result from a good deal of feminine education. The experience of life is generally enough to undeceive one’s conceit, but it will not always cure helplessness.

‘Now I don’t want you to get into idle-

young-lady habits of frittering away your time,' said Worsley to his daughters when they left school. 'Get something to do.'

It did not occur to them to reply, that with half-a-dozen children to attend to and teach, the farming and gardening on their hands, and the care of their own and the children's wardrobes, idleness was hardly likely to get so much as a chance of becoming a habit, and that the something to do was not far to seek. On the contrary they received the suggestion with enthusiasm, and quite saw that it would never do for them to become 'like other girls.'

'Let us write!' they exclaimed, purchased a ream of sermon paper, and began each a three-volume novel, in which they proposed to expose all the shams, fallacies, and conventionalities of society, and to point

out as the only legitimate aim in life their own lofty and Utopian ideals.

At about the same time Mr. Worsley decided that Jack, who had already run away from several schools, and who showed no aptitude for the study of Latin and Greek, was to receive now a modern education—and, furthermore, at the hands of his two sisters. Who more fitted than they who had just returned from school, and could speak German like natives, to instruct Jack in modern languages ? This they also undertook with characteristic energy and assurance ; and when, not long afterwards, it was discovered that the expenses of washing, dressing, and feeding, and of keeping Roland at Oxford were far in excess of their income, they cheerfully dismissed their last servant, and took absolutely everything upon their shoulders.

Even in their economies they could not be like other people. 'It is the worst economy in the world to get a cheap thing,' was a remark Worsley was wont to make; and the idea was speedily assimilated by the girls to whose intelligence the logic of the statement recommended itself, cheap of course being synonymous with inferior.

'If you do a thing at all, do it properly,' said Worsley.

'Is it agreed that we keep fowls?'

Oh! of course they must keep fowls.

'Very well, then, we must keep the best; none of your rubbishy barn-door birds. Are we to keep cows?'

Of course—to utilize the meadow; and think of the saving!

The same with the garden. No mere potato-growing! though that, indeed, would represent no trifling labour. Decency required a

flower-garden, and with a greenhouse ready to their hands, economy itself demanded the forcing of tomatoes and the culture of vines.

‘What was the use,’ said Worsley, when taking up his position with regard to the gardening question, ‘what was the use of growing inferior vegetables, when a very little extra expenditure of money, time, and trouble would produce the very best that could be grown?’ The family scouted the bare suggestion that any of them should be thought capable of producing so much as a turnip that was not superior to other people’s turnips ; and so on all hands the extra expenditure was embarked upon, and every time that they had to hire a man to dig the heavier ground for them, each and all felt a vague sense of failure and disgrace in that they had been forced to call in aid

from the outer world, and to act, for once and most reluctantly, like everybody else.

Seeing that Worsley was apt to be absent from home for weeks at a time, it was agreed that some sort of dog ought to be kept on the premises, for the house stood alone amongst the fields on a somewhat unfrequented road, and the rural policeman was tacitly understood to be the greatest thief in the village—perhaps he was maligned. At any rate a dog became imperative.

Did they adopt a stray dog for nothing, or purchase a second-hand cur for about half-a-crown ? Not they.

A mastiff, they thought, would be a jolly sort of dog to keep—a good powerful beast that could tackle two or three burglars at once. Accordingly, they set about getting up the subject, and soon found out that

there are mastiffs and mastiffs. You can either have a plain mongrel about the size of a donkey—a common barn-door or garden mastiff as it were ; or—here they became really interested—you can have a creature who traces his descent from the ancient Britons, who knows the names of his progenitors for generations back, who belongs to the very bluest aristocracy of dogs, prizes being the commonest events in his career.

‘ *That’s* the sort of dog !’ they cried, and betook themselves with ardour to the fascinating columns of the *Swop and Sell*, an advertising paper which played the medium’s part in most of their speculations in fowls, cats, cows, plants, and such like. Many were the rare bargains the Worsleys effected by means of the *Swop and Sell* ; Janet, indeed, had quite a passion for

answering advertisements, especially when fowls were in question, but lately even Janet's sanguine confidence had received a blow. She had purchased for her yard a monstrous cinnamon Cochin cock, whose pedigree was said to be faultless. In thinking over the matter afterwards, she was fain to confess that what had really determined her to 'buy the beast' was the fact that the man who wanted to get rid of him asked four guineas for him. All went well at first ; he really was a magnificent creature, and *such* a colour, 'Like a haughty scroll of gold!' said Janet, caressing him fondly ; 'like burnished wall-flowers ; like Ella's hair ; like maple leaves in Canada in the fall!' The bird was turned into his new run to fraternize with his future companions, and Janet went away to other things. In course of time they could not help noticing

that the glorious bird, weighed down, perhaps, with the burden of his own rank and beauty, was seldom seen in any but a reclining posture.

‘He’s weak on his legs,’ said Jack bluntly one day, after watching him intelligently, ‘that’s what it is.’

‘Make him into curried rabbit,’ suggested Ella, who really was too heartless about the fowls.

‘What!’ cried Janet, outraged. ‘A prize bird? And we’ve only just given four guineas for him!’

‘Well, I suspect the only way to save his life will be to eat him up before he dies,’ said Jack contemptuously.

And sure enough the bird became daily less animated, till it was evident that he must be sold at once if ever any part of that four guineas was to be seen again.

Janet set to work and devised, with masterly astuteness and a wary regard for truth, as alluring an advertisement as ever graced the pages of the *Swop and Sell*, and the great bargain went away the next week, sold, but not—oh, not for four guineas. It was long a painful subject.

The result of the great mastiff question was the purchase first of a puppy, who turned out singularly unlike a prize animal; this, as they had brought it up and become fond of it, they kept; but as it did not answer their ideal, they added Hardigras, a really handsome dog, to their modest kennel, and were startled one fine February morning by the arrival of ten squealing, squirming, mastiff puppies; while Ban, their proud mother, had suddenly become so savage, that no one's life was safe out of doors after dark.

Jack declared that most of the puppies ought to be drowned at once ; but the girls, with an eye to profit, besides being shocked at so horrible an idea, said they would rather bring up half of them by hand than destroy a single puppy—the lovely fat things with grave, sooty, wrinkled faces.

Accordingly the ten puppies were kept, and oh ! the trouble they were ! Three times a day Jack fetched in half a dozen of them, shot them down on the kitchen floor, and left them, merely shouting out, ‘ Here you are ! ’ and the puppies tumbled and tottered vaguely over the boards till somebody came to feed them. This took place on a large sheet of brown paper, with a saucer of warm milk placed in the middle ; and many, I fear, were the execrations and maledictions pronounced over the untoward little creatures as they reluctantly under-

went the process. As fast as one was caught and applied to the saucer, the rest escaped into the stick-cupboard, down a hole in the floor, under the grate, or walked into the saucer and upset it ; and by the time their benefactor was ready to start again, the milk was sure to have got cold, and any puppy that supped off cold milk always had a bad pain.

‘It’s *much* worse than babies,’ said Ella one night, as she knelt in the dim firelight over the brown paper, and held one of the wrinkled things head first into the saucer, while the retreating forms of the others, like locomotive sausages, might have been descried just vanishing into the gloom.

‘Nothing could be worse than babies,’ said Janet, moved to pity by the mere suggestion, for babies were not her *forte*. ‘Let *me* do it.’

It became one of their items of private self-denial to offer to feed the puppies. When their nurse for the time was on the point of starting off for an evening service at Hawbourne, the conduct of these puppies seemed to be dictated by nothing short of fiendish malignity, and was anything but conducive to a Christian frame of mind.

‘Little nuisances ! I wish them all at the bottom of the sea !’ cried Ella one evening, with a despairing glance at the inexorable clock and another at the equally inexorable puppies waddling fatuously about the brown paper.

‘You had the chance of the stable-bucket,’ said Jack, as he steamed his boots at the fire.

‘Ah ! poor dear little doggies !’ and she fell to coaxing them with renewed patience.

It was amid distractions like these that

the girls were told to get something to do, and began their novels.

It was diverting to hear them talking to each other across the table, where they sat with bescribbled papers scattered all round them, note-books, favourite extracts, jottings and happy notions sprinkled freely about.

‘Doesn’t it look nice and literary?’ they said to each other as they settled down about bedtime for what they called ‘a regular orgie,’ which meant an hour or so of writing, interspersed with cups of Epps’s cocoa.

‘Our aim, of course,’ Janet said one day, ‘is to educate the public.’

‘Of course,’ said Ella readily; ‘and I shall have headings to all my chapters in as many languages as possible.’

‘I fancy that is calculated to annoy the

being known as "the ordinary reader of fiction,"' laughed Janet ; ' but that doesn't matter in the smallest degree.'

' No, if it rouses in his breast even the wish that he knew anything of those languages,' said Ella, ' I shall not have lived and written in vain.'

' We must expect obloquy,' said Janet tranquilly. ' Work like ours can't be popular. We don't write for popularity.'

' Listen to this, Janet,' said Ella presently, and read out a passage that she had just completed. ' Is that passionate enough? I really can't do these deathbed scenes—I'd as soon say my prayers out loud at the breakfast-table, or do my crying by daylight, as analyse my most sacred feelings and elaborate them on paper just to help the reader to an emotion or two. I wonder whether he feels himself a superior being

when he has shed a few tears over his book ? I dare say he does. Besides, you know, when once you have pumped up the tears you can turn them to any purpose you please. Don't you remember, Janet, when we were whipped for stealing apricots and then lying about it, and we cried all the afternoon, you said, after the first half-hour, that you were crying for your sins, and I said I was crying because grandmamma was dead—and she died long before I was born ?'

'Yes ! what jolly little fools we must have been !'

'Do you know, Janet,' said Ella despondently, after a minute's silent reflection, 'I am not sure that we are not fools still, though neither so little nor so jolly perhaps as we were. I'm afraid we shall never succeed.'

‘Why not?’ demanded Janet, without looking up, as she wrote calmly on. ‘I *mean* to succeed!’

‘Why, you see, we haven’t a grain of sympathy with our public—we ride roughshod over their prejudices and their tastes. The mere sight of a three-volume novel calls forth our sneers and sarcasms. As for crying over one—why,’ Ella went on, looking round the room in search of an epithet, ‘I just feel I’ve been betrayed into tears over a paltry tricking with words. If the situation doesn’t call forth one’s sympathy, I’m sure one oughtn’t to have to give it to the mere piling up of tearful words; and then, when you’ve done crying, you know they did it on purpose.’

‘Yes,’ said Janet. ‘It reminds me of when we had to go and apologize at school, after a bad morning. Miss Skeen never let

us out of her room till she had made us cry.'

'She had her regular touchstone for each girl,' said Ella. 'Some of them used to begin yelling at once ; but it took her a long time to work *me* up. I used to see how long I could balance myself on one leg, and count the stripes on her gown ; but when she came to "Your poor dear mother," or said anything about papa, I always knew she was gaining on me, and then I cried out of sheer rage. I knew it was a trick all the time.'

'Well, we've merely to adopt the trick,' said Janet, 'and practise it on the "ordinary reader of fiction."'

Here Roland, who chanced to be at home, broke in, and startled them with a remark when they thought he was reading.

'You two are going quite the wrong way

to work. If you write for the public, you must write what the public likes, not what *you* think the public *ought* to like.'

'What !' cried Janet, firing up at once. 'Deliberately stoop to flatter and indulge tastes which we despise ?'

'Despise ! There you are again,' said the worldly-wise Roland. 'How can you expect your precious reader of fiction to read your things when you take no pains to disguise your unutterable contempt for him and his fiction ?'

'Of course we don't tell him that,' said Ella.

'No,' retorted Roland, 'you pay him the extra compliment of taking him for such a fool that he will not find you out.'

Ella began to see some force in this argument, and coloured as she glanced at Janet to see how she took it. Janet, how-

ever, was not so ready to part with her opinions.

‘To please the public is not our object,’ she said with lofty gravity; ‘we intend to raise and improve the taste of the ordinary rea——’

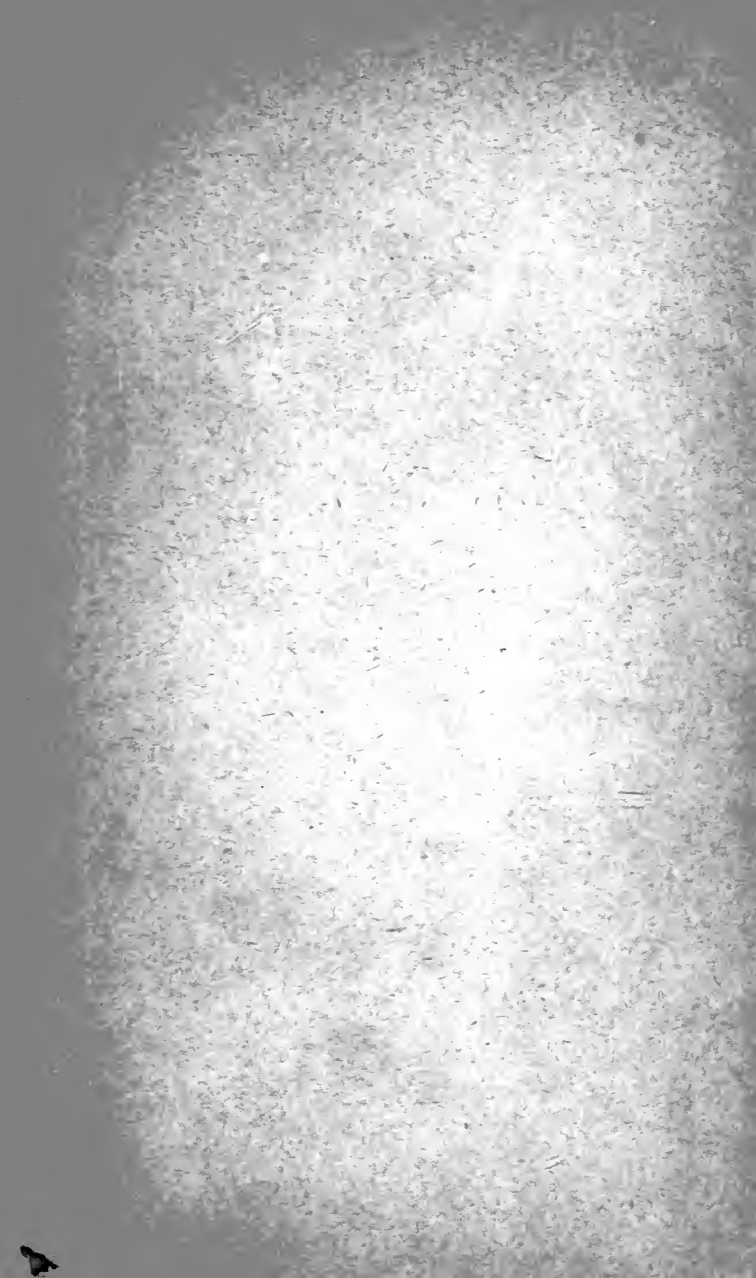
‘Bosh!’ rudely interrupted Roland, taking up the poker and turning away, as if, after expressing such sentiments, she really was not worth his further consideration. He went on, however, when he had finished poking the fire: ‘You can’t expect any human being to absorb all that intolerable quantity of medicine without one half-pennyworth of jam—much less to like it. As for Janet’—he looked at his clever sister with mingled contempt and despair—‘she seizes the reader by the scruff of his neck, thrusts a raw beefsteak before him, rubs his nose in it, and says, “Now, you

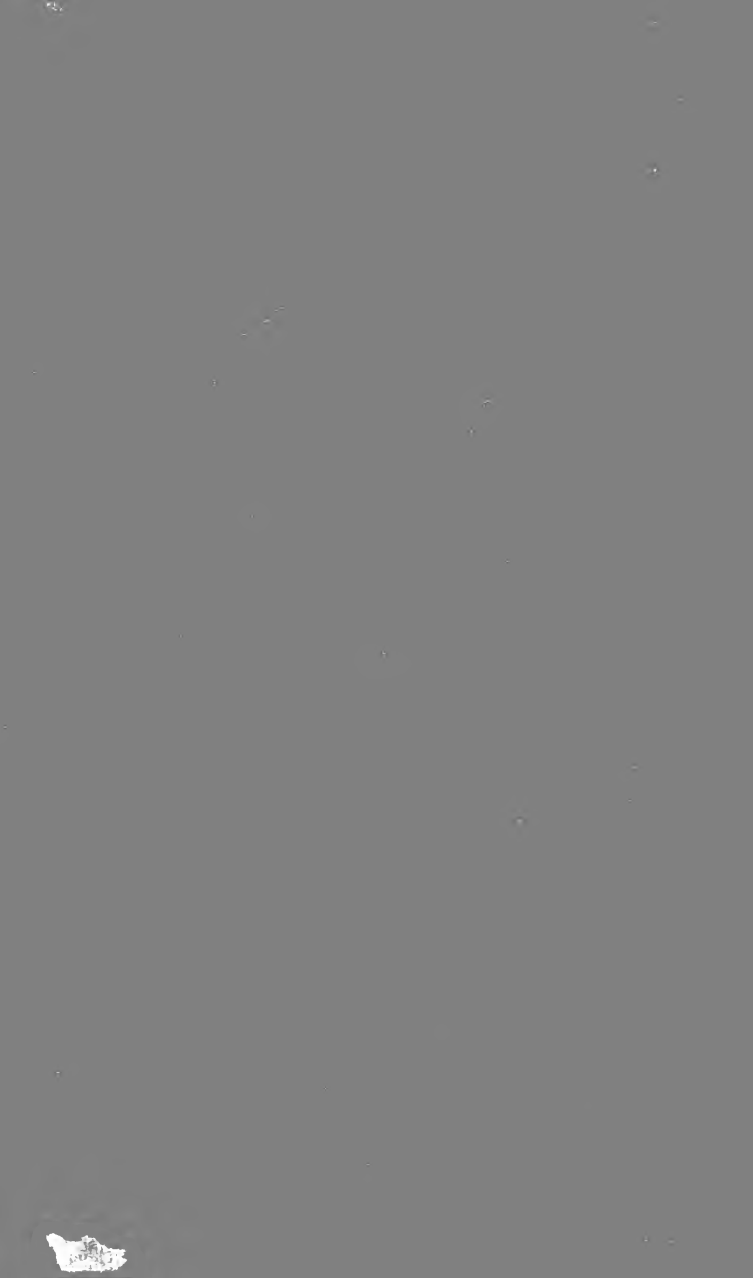
contemptible palterer ! eat that instantly, or fight me !” and for that she expects to be handsomely paid, and worshipped into the bargain.’

Having delivered himself of these withering sentiments young Worsley resumed his paper, and the girls, somewhat subdued, pursued their writing in silence, reserving their further remarks till they should be alone.

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